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To ra do ra s

STORY YUYUKO TAKEMIYA

ART YASU

VISIT...

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Table of Contents

[Christmas Eve Night](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Newsletter](#)



VOLUME 7

story **Yuyuko Takemiya**

illustrations **Yasu**

It happened on the
twenty-fourth of December,
Christmas Eve night.

Boy...open your eyes.
It's time for the
Christmas party!





HUNKS
ONLY

I rubbed my sleepy eyes and opened them.

“Aha ha! ♥ Come this way to the exclusive party venue for hot guys! ♥”

Ami-chan, dressed as a sexy Santa, led me in. What was that about hot guys?

She couldn’t be talking about me. I had to go in.

I didn’t hesitate as I stepped through the door.



When I entered, I was the only guy there. I looked to my right, and there were girls!

“Kyaa! Look at this, Nanako! A handsome guy just walked in!

Hey, you over there, come over here, over here! Come closer~!”

I looked to the left, and there were girls!

“Maya, you’re making too big of a deal out of it...but, I mean, it’s not like I don’t like smart-looking guys...”

Whoa, stop that! If you press your breasts against me like that, I’m going to have trouble walking, ha ha ha...

I didn’t know where to look, but I was invited even further in.

My expectations kept going up.

“Oh, what a fabulous gentleman! YO! The party is still far from over. If you would like, you may have a meal here to replenish your strength.”

Oof! What a weirdo! Definitely not! No thank you! I don't need it! I decided to completely ignore her.





“What...Minorin and I aren't
interesting enough for you?
I came here thinking I'd do
something 'fun' since it was
Christmas... Whatever. Idiot.
I'm going home.”

Whoa! What the heck is this?!

W-w-wait, I definitely wasn't
ignoring you!

While yelling, I desperately
ran after her, but...

“Ouch!”

...Oh no! I fell!



Ouuuch... As I get up
someone extends their hand.

“Hey, keep it together!”

“We’re naked! We’re both
naked!”

Aaaaaaahh!

That’s vulgar! It’s gross! Stay
away! Hide your shame!

I want to keep playing with
the cute and super sexy
Santas!



*"By 'cute and super
sexy Santas,' did you
mean us?!"*

Gyaaaaaaaaah...

*My scream melted
into the dream I
had on the night of
Christmas Eve...and
vanished...*

"Oh dear, what a problem you have...ha ha!"

"I don't wanna be paired with Kitamura!"

"No way, I can't believe you, Haruta-kun. ♥"

"Hey, hey! My chest is way more ripped than that. You wanna see?"

"Why was I the only unsexy one?!"

...So that was what my dream was like!

"Di-disgu-disgu-DISGUSTING!"

"You pervert! You're the worst!"

"I'm actually not the most pitiful one!"

We're so sorry for showing you something so unpleasant!
Please don't worry! The book is nothing like this nightmare! ➡



Toradora!

7

BY
Yuyuko Takemiya

ILLUSTRATED BY
Yasu



Seven Seas Entertainment

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ToC

Table of
Contents

CHAPTER

1



CHAPTER

2



CHAPTER

3



CHAPTER

4



CHAPTER

5



Chapter 1

She hadn't really intended to worry about it.

Sitting on the shabby, freezing bench with a glove over her downturned head, Kushieda Minori still couldn't bring herself to stand. The other team members were giving her words of encouragement. *Captain, you've got to keep it positive. None of us were doing that well today. We all have days like this. It's just a practice match, so don't let it get to you.* Of course, she couldn't *not* let it get to her. As the team captain, it was too pathetic. She couldn't forgive herself after such a terrible play.

Plus, to be blunt, if anyone asked whether she had her head one hundred percent in the game, it was a fact that she hadn't.

They had been on the ninth inning with two outs and no runners, and they had a three-to-one lead in the final inning.

The ball made a dull sound as it connected with the bat. It traced a loose arc; it could have been caught after one bound. It was almost as though the ball were happily jumping into her glove. *Yes, we've scored ourselves a win,* she thought as she went to catch it. She would get it to first base, and the match would be over—or it should have been.

"Huh?!"

"What are you doing, Kushiedaaa?!"

"Kyaah!"

The screams were coming from the very bench she was sitting on. The players on the other school's bench were yelling, "We did it! We did it!" "You got it, run!" She couldn't believe it was true. All her hair stood on end. Why had the ball spilled out of her glove right before she had thrown it?

The more flustered she grew, the worse the situation became. She kicked the ball with the tip of her shoe as it rolled away and then tried to pick it up. "Roll, roll," she could hear people yelling. *No way, no way, no way. This is bad, this is bad, this is bad.* When she failed to pick it up again, the runner was coming

around the second base. Amid the shrieks and cheers, she finally got the ball and threw it at third. She missed. The runner simply reached the home plate. And then there was the rest of it.

There was the smell of the suffocating dust.

The midwinter wind that she was powerless against, as it chilled her.

It was a late Sunday afternoon. The rays from the sun were beginning to slant.

She was a loser who couldn't even stand up.

They were like falling dominos. Once their ace player's blunder threw off the team's concentration, they weren't able to recover. Someone got a base from a walk, and on top of all that, their stacking errors got the other team a home run before they knew it.

"Ahhh...seriously..."

Minori hunched over with her glove covering her face like a hood. She held her head in her hands. She didn't seem to care that her knees were grimy with dirt as she pushed her nose between them. It wasn't anyone else's fault. She wasn't convinced that it didn't matter because it was a practice match. This hadn't happened because they were having an off day. This day wasn't a one-off fluke.

It happened because her thoughts were in a mess and she had lost her focus. That was why things ended up like this. In other words, if she continued to be like this, they would probably never win another match.

"What am I even doing...?"

"What do you think you're doing?" said Taiga.

"I'm not doing anything..."

You lazy, lazy, lazy, lazy, lazy, lazy, lazy, lazy, lazy, lazy oaf!

The winter winds that assaulted him combined with the jeers to create a tornado-like vortex that swirled around Takasu Ryuuji. His bangs were sent dancing by the freezing wind and his eyes were wide open, so he looked like the

spitting image of a demon king materializing out of thin air. He looked sinister enough that he could have easily blown away a planet or two, but in actuality he wasn't trying to do that, and he wasn't going to become a demon king. He was just feeling slightly down after someone had publicly pointed out the truth.

"I couldn't help it! Because—"

"SHAH-HUP!"

At the same time she yelled that unintelligible phrase—*WHAM-BAM!*—he got a double slap coming at him from the right and left. She was probably telling him to "shut up." Ryuuji held both his cheeks and did just that. Her sudden assaults always surprised him.

"Don't make excuses, you lazy oaf! You butt-ugly, lazy oaf of a stupid perverted Russell terrier! You lifelong bug repellent! You fish flake-covered idiot! You've got the face of a harebrained walrus!"

Further attacks were fired at him like countless missiles that originated from another dimension. They assailed the demon king from all angles and dug their way into his heart. For the finishing touch came Taiga's scornful voice. "Keh!" She was a brute... No, that wasn't strong enough. The one he would rather call a demon pompously stuck up her arrogant chin.

That arrogant way she stood. The haughtiness in the way she held up her chin. The cold-bloodedness in her half-open eyes, which were filled with contempt. The one whose cheeks had turned rosy from the cold wind and who now pushed up her hair was Aisaka Taiga, known as the Palmtop Tiger. She was the beautiful demon in the flesh.

Her face was as delicate as a French doll's. She was called "Palmtop" because of how petite she was, but the cool, monotone voice that came from her physique was lower than expected.

"Ryuuji, I wonder if all that's left for you now is to die alone..."

Slash—she cut him down in a flash.

Ryuuji transformed into a speechless statue in the middle of the road. This was even more merciless than the double slap. *Aren't these practically the same as acts of violence?* he thought. *Are you fine with that, police officer? Is this*

justice, Japan? Isn't this something that should be outlawed? He gathered his scattered courage and cradled his neatly halved heart. Ryuuji readied himself and glared at Taiga.

“D-don't think that a constitutional country will leave you unchecked forever...!”

“Huh?”

His desperate comeback turned to dust and disappeared within a moment when faced with Taiga sticking her finger in her ears as she jeered at him. Cold wind blew through the prickly silence that came between them.

It was a winter Sunday.

The sun set early. It was barely past five, but the sky was already darkening into dusk. It was a bit congested, with the housewife regulars of the street-side stores bringing their families in tow, a group of old ladies wearing masks, and young kids who seemed to be heading out for a night on the town.

Ryuuji's elbows bumped into the passersby. He quickly bowed his head and made way for them. Right, no matter how horrible her words were or how terribly he was hurt, he couldn't stay petrified in the middle of the street forever. He'd be blocking traffic. He reverted back to a conventional living human being, ready for the rest of the walk home.

“Huh? Taiga?”

That was when he finally realized that the demon that had been dispatching multidimensional missiles had disappeared before his very eyes. *She may be a demon, but she's still the Palmtop Tiger.* He didn't really know what he was saying, but what he was getting at was that she was small. Because she was petite, Taiga might have been pushed around by the crowd and gotten lost.

“Heeey! Taigaaa, where did you go?!”

With the hefty ecobags hanging from both his hands, Ryuuji wandered through the crowd for a while, looking left and right for the top of Taiga's head. The landmarks he was looking for were her waist-length wavy hair, the white angora coat that looked expensive at a glance, and the warm men's scarf that was wrapped a full three times around her neck.

They would both be going back to the Takasus' place anyway, and even if Taiga had gone back to her own home, her condo was right next door. With things coming to this, it would have been fine for them to go home separately, but under the December sky, he felt anxious after losing sight of her. *What's the deal?* he thought, his forehead wrinkled as he looked around.

"Eep..."

He saw a young mother shy away to the side of the road while holding her child and told her in his head, *I'm not some random attacker.*

"What do you think you're doing? You look exactly like you're going to randomly attack someone, the way you've got yourself planted to the ground like that."

"Whoa!" said Ryuuji. "Where were you? I was looking all over for you! Actually, it's like you don't even really care whether I'm even here..."

Taiga, who had slipped from between the passersby and reappeared, smiled in satisfaction. She thrust something she was holding in her right hand at him. There was no mistaking what that half-uncovered, half-wrapped-in-paper object was, especially with its sweet milky and buttery fragrance paired with the all-too-recognizable ring shape.

"A doughnut... Where did you even get that?"

"Over there. Hee hee, it smelled so good that I had to buy it! I don't know how it'll taste, so I just bought one for now. If it's good, I'll get in line again and buy a ton."

There was a van stopped in the alleyway that Taiga pointed at with her doughnut. The truck's back hatch was open to form an impromptu storefront where several men and women were forming a line. Now that she mentioned it, he really could smell the sweet scent of doughnuts in the air. For people with a sweet tooth (Taiga included), the smell was certainly too enticing to ignore.

Ryuuji didn't dislike sweet things, for sure. *Huh*, he thought as he scanned the handwritten sign, tilting his head in confusion. The words written on the sign in permanent marker spelled out "Krispy Creamy," apparently the store's name. It seemed like an obvious knock-off—in fact, it couldn't have been anything

except a knock-off.

“Are you sure about that place? The name looks suspicious right off the bat.”

“It’s fine. Look, that person’s eating one and walking. They’re not poisoned... probably.”

“Why are you even eating it if that’s something you’ve got to worry about?”

“Because, look, it’s Krispy Creamy. Ha ha, this is definitely a knock-off.”

“That’s why I said it’s suspicious. If they were an actual doughnut shop, they wouldn’t name themselves something that sounds like another place because of trademark, or something.”

“But I definitely won’t ever get to eat one from the real place. I’ve checked it out in the past, but it’s still so crowded! I got fed up just seeing the line! All of the people who have tried them say they’re crispy and fluffy. They’re supposed to melt right in your mouth until they disappear. I’m set on trying one no matter what.”

“Well, they’re supposed to be completely different from any other doughnut.”

“Right, exactly. They’re bold enough to sell these under practically the same name, so they’re probably made to taste like the original, right? Mmm, it smells so good! Well then, now to see what it tastes like...”

Ahhhh. She opened her mouth wide. Taiga rudely sunk her teeth into the edge of the doughnut right in the middle of the crowd. For a moment, she had a pleasant look on her face, but it slowly clouded as she chewed. Her expression became odder as her chin moved up and down.

“How is it? Is it different from any other doughnut place?”

As she chewed, Taiga nodded, but her excitement dwindled to the point where he could see it in her eyes.

“It really is...completely...different. It’s like it’s dry. It’s like it’s sucking all the moisture out of my mouth...”

“Don’t let it go to waste. Remember—*mottainai.*”

“Oh, I just thought of something! I’ll put this in your closet. I think it’ll be a great dehumidifier.”

“Don’t let any go to waste,” Ryuuji repeated again. *“Mottainai.”*

“Ugh...”

She looked at the giant doughnut a bit resentfully and pouted. The other people who had bought the same doughnut were eating as they walked. They still looked pretty healthy. No one had collapsed, but their expressions looked questionable. Taiga was also part of that group.

“It says they have doughnuts~!”

“It’s Krispy Kreme!” They were mistaken.

The doughnut wasn’t so bad that Taiga or Ryuuji were about to go out of their way to tell the squealing junior high school girls, who had happily joined the line with their allowances in their hands.

“Seriously, what are you doing ruining your appetite right before dinner? How much was that thing?”

“Two hundred yen...”

“Two hundred yen! You paid two hundred yen to eat a dehumidifier that you’d put in a closet!”

He wasn’t trying to get revenge on her for picking on him earlier, but he couldn’t go without saying something in front of Taiga, who was becoming less enthusiastic about the doughnut in her hand. This was a teachable moment. Ideally, she wouldn’t make the same mistake again.

Incidentally, that day’s dinner was going to be a simple Japanese rice wine-marinated amberjack fish and mizuna mustard hot pot. He also planned to make finely chopped lotus root and burdock with chicken skin in it and multigrain rice with ginger cooked into it. To be frank, the amberjack had been expensive. He had just bought it in fillet form, but it was expensive. It had been expensive because it was wild fish. It had been expensive buying enough for three people. *But it’s in season! The farm-raised ones weren’t cheap either, so why not buy it wild when you can?! Right, and also—*

“Plus, I bought the amberjack today to celebrate!”

“I said I get that...”

“That wasn’t enthusiastic! You don’t get it! That’s the reason why you got tricked into buying a doughnut from a weird stand! You saw how much the amberjack cost, didn’t you?! You knew how excited I was about it, didn’t you?! And then you still went and gave up space in your stomach for something that didn’t even taste good...I didn’t want to ruin things by saying anything more than I had to, but amberjack is super luxurious for my place! Damn it, you better be happy about the amount I paid for this, even if you’re faking it!”

“Yay! Yay! It’s amberjack!”

“More! That’s weak!”

“Amberjack is a huge catch! Yippee!”

He watched her long hair fluff up as she, still expressionless with a doughnut in one hand, leapt for joy. *Good*, Ryuuji nodded to her. With this, the amberjack, and also the several bills that had disappeared from the Takasu’s household budget, could rest in peace having not been used in vain. Though Taiga’s two-hundred-yen allowance would become a forever wandering vengeful spirit, that wasn’t in Ryuuji’s jurisdiction.

That’s right. That night would be a celebration. On Monday morning, Taiga’s school suspension would be over. Starting the next day, Taiga would be able to go to school. Come to think of it, two weeks had gone by quick.

In other words, two weeks had passed since that nightmarish incident. Ryuuji sighed again. He didn’t know whether to call it a nightmare or not, but... No, he wouldn’t think about it anymore. No good would come from thinking about it. The reality was that Taiga would no longer be suspended and would be able to go to school the next day. Wasn’t that enough?

“...So. We were in the middle of our conversation. Why are you like that?” The young lady in the angora coat narrowed her eyes. Just that faint motion of her eyelids gave him the premonition of her overflowing tyranny.

He cautiously took his distance as he asked back, “Like what?”

“I was asking you why you’re so lazy. Why haven’t you done anything when you had a chance without me being around to get in your way? Why haven’t you been able to get any closer to Minorin? That’s what I want to know, personally. What do you think you were doing? What was the point of me going out of my way to get myself suspended?”

“You didn’t do that for me.”

“Don’t you go changing the topic, you coward!”

“...”

At this irrationality, which made his stomach curdle, Ryuuji unintentionally held his tongue. Taiga quickly closed the distance between them.

“While I was gone, you two should have been going to school together! You should have invited her to lunch! You should have hung out with her on the weekends! There were a ton of things you should have been doing, weren’t there?! What happened to all of that?! You didn’t even message her?! Ha! You’re a laughingstock, you lazy, lazy, lazy, lazy, lazy...ow! I bit my tongue!”

She held her own mouth as she writhed. Ryuuji took it as a chance to successfully get a word in edgewise and make his excuses.

“Well, I couldn’t do any of that! When you’re not around, Kushieda won’t come to our meeting spot in the morning, and she eats with other girls at lunch, and I don’t know those girls at all. She always seemed like she was at softball club after school, too! I couldn’t think of a reason to message her out of the blue, either!”

Now that he had said it out loud, he realized how pitiful he was. But it was the truth.

Once Taiga was suspended, the common thread between Ryuuji and Minori just disappeared. Up until then he thought that, even if only slightly, the distance between him and his long-unrequited love had shrunk over the passing days. Though there was nothing romantic between them, he had thought they were friends, at least. Instead, it turned out that without Taiga as common ground between them, Ryuuji and Minori didn’t even have anything to talk about. Of course, it wasn’t as though they were ignoring each other. They

would exchange greetings, like, *Good morning, Bye, Yo!, or How've you been?*

Ryuuji heaved a long sigh and stopped in his tracks. *Wait a second*, he thought, raising his head.

“But compared to how we were in April, I guess we’ve made a lot of progress? Yeah, I think we have.”

He crossed his arms and nodded in agreement with himself.

“Of. Course. You. Haven’t. You. Lazy. Oaf,” said Taiga.

“Ahhhhh...ugh.”

A shriek the likes of which had never come from him before overflowed from his throat. He expected no less from Taiga, architect of rare shrieks—but it wasn’t the time to be thinking that.

Taiga was peeling up Ryuuji’s upper lip as though she were about to pluck it away. She was doing her best to tear it right off. The part connecting his gums to his lips seemed like it could tear at any moment, and he was afraid she would flip his face right off. Ryuuji automatically turned his head up and stood on his tiptoes.

“What do you mean she wouldn’t go to the meeting spot, you idiot?! Idiot! Idiot! Idiooooot! You think you’re on standby?! What do you think you’re doing?! You think you’re Hachiko the dog?! Did you think that if you just waited silently and without doing anything Minorin would just conveniently ask you to meet?! Oh my, my, my, what an unbelievable person you are! Why, it’s terrifying! What a travesty!”

“Ahhheek~!”

“I leverage capital punishment on your passive nature! You can continue waiting for Minorin in the afterlife!”

“Ahhhhhheeeeeek~!”

Help me! he thought.

At the genuine threat to his existence, he closed his eyes, before which his life started to flash. Kindergarten...peeing his pants at the graduation ceremony... his elementary school entrance ceremony...being the only one with a second-

hand backpack...going on a trip his second year...Yasuko sleeping in and forgetting to make his lunch...and right around then...his nickname, “prodigal bastard,” being cemented in place...

“Oh.”

At the same time as that small sound, Taiga’s fingers unexpectedly let go of his lip. He staggered after being released from the force hoisting his head up. He opened his eyes, which were wet with tears.

“Whoa!”

Ryuuji grunted, too. The people around them had also stopped and raised their voices all over the place at the scene, “Whoa!” “Amazing!”

A belt of light had lit up in front of the stores that sandwiched the road.

The illuminated displays that had probably been made to order by the neighborhood association switched on all at once. The yellow, glittering lights traced loops and waves as though crawling along the eaves and continuously blinked on and off. There was a blue, blinking arch of brilliant lights that stretched as far as the eye could see. In a moment, the sky of the store-filled streets had become a too-vivid planetarium as the pale stars of the evening disappeared.

The beauty of those lights.

Jingle jingle jingle. Starting with the sound of bells, background music began pouring through the speakers. Smiling Santas and red-nosed reindeer clung to the imitation fir trees that hung from the streetlamps, flashing brightly. A speech bubble-shaped light blinked, “Merry Christmas!”

“Right... Oh, right! It’s almost Christmas!”

In the glittering lights, Taiga extended her arms widely and looked up to the heavens. She wore an innocent smile he had never seen her use before as she did a full turn to face Ryuuji. Then her voice rang out, “It’s amaaaa...zing! Oh, how beautiful this is! How lovely! We didn’t have lights like these last year!”

He saw the LEDs twinkle in her eyes, gleaming like brilliant gems.

“I wonder if there’s a tree somewhere, too?!”

At Taiga's behavior, Ryuuji forgot the pain in his upper lip and smiled despite himself.

"Yeah," he said, "they put a lot of spirit into this year's decorations. Christmas, huh, it really is coming up, now that you mention it."

"You know what, I loooooo..."

Taiga closed her eyes tight, formed her hands into fists, and crouched. "...oooove Christmas!" she yelled, and like a firework, did a silly hop into the air and stretched out all of her limbs. *That kid's super excited*, someone in the crowd mumbled. Even some people they didn't know were smiling at her. As she enthusiastically spread her arms to the sky and threw her head back, Taiga's eyes glittered all the more. They were wet, almost as though she were about to cry.

"Ahh, I'm so looking forward to it! I have to be a good girl for a while! I need to be a good girl! He'll be approaching the skies in Japan soon!"

"Who will?"

"That's obvious. Santa is! Santa Claus!"

There was no embarrassment or fear of others' judgment in her yell. Taiga gave him a full-faced smile.

"Give me one. I'll carry one of your bags."

She stole one of the ecobags from Ryuuji's hands. *Ah*, he thought, *she's snatched it... Wait, no*. His actions were automatic.

"Wh-what are you doing?" said Taiga.

"Don't die on me, Taiga!"

I don't have a fever. She pushed aside the hand Ryuuji had pressed against her forehead, but she was gentler than usual when she did it. In that moment, the sting and ridicule was absent from her earnest gaze.

"I just want you to let me help every once in a while! I'm serious about being a good girl when Santa's so close by! I really, really love Christmas!"

"Well, I get that, but this is just too sudden... Actually, what's with you? Why

do you love Christmas so much?”

“What do you mean ‘Why?!’ Do I need a reason to love Christmas?! Look, the streets are so pretty and sparkly right now. Everyone is smiling and happy and... right! Ryuuji, I have something to ask! Could you make a lavish feast on the twenty-fifth?! Something amazing that we don’t eat normally! Like tons of chicken! Or tons of beef! Or something else! Like something a foreigner would eat!”

Tons of chicken and beef!

Had Ryuuji ever encountered words that had so sincerely moved him to the core? Ryuuji’s sanpaku eyes quivered with a glitter of maddened delight. Then, he licked his lips. He wasn’t thinking, *I don’t care whether it’s chicken, beef, or human! Hra hra ha ha ha!* or anything like that—the romantic Christmas lights had simply reflected in his wide-open eyes.

“Well, now that you say that, I suddenly feel an itch to put my skills to use! Yeah, I feel it burning inside me! We’ll have a special feast on Christmas! All right, leave it to me!”

“I will! I’ll go to the department store basement and buy the most delicious cake—the entire cake! Hee hee, what kind of cake should I buy?! Maybe a yule log?! Ahh, I need to get a magazine and do some research! Right, we should get champagne for Ya-chan—the really good kind!”

For a moment, they grew more and more enthusiastic as they stood in the middle of the street, but then it hit them. They even fell silent in perfect synchrony.

“So,” said Ryuuji, “the only problem is...”

“Christmas Eve, right,” said Taiga. “I don’t know who went and decided it, but...”

“It’s considered a couple’s holiday all over the world, isn’t it...”

Ryuuji and Taiga exchanged looks with each other. A moment later, they both sighed. “Ahhh.” Of course, what came to their minds was each of their crushes. For Ryuuji, that was Kushieda Minori, and for Taiga, that was Kitamura Yuusaku.

Taiga, in particular, had circumstances that would warrant a sigh.

“I’m completely done for. I can’t invite him over or anything. It’s like...what would I even call it? It’s like I’m imposing on him. Doesn’t it seem like that? He just got his heart broken, so he’d be lonely.”

She was talking about what had happened two weeks ago. On the same day that Taiga had been suspended, Kitamura had boldly pulled a stunt and been spectacularly rejected by the previous student council president in front of the whole school.

Though it must have been a shock to Taiga that Kitamura had a big brothe—no, a girl he liked, that big brotherly patriarch—that girl had moved away to study abroad. It wasn’t an even playing field, but...

“Kitamura was pretty worried that you were suspended.”

“No way! Really? H-he did message me to ask how I was doing a few times.”

“It’s true. If you invited Kitamura over, he definitely wouldn’t turn you down.”

“Aaaaah...he would, right?! I don’t want it to happen like that! It’s kind of like...there’s an invisible force coercing him... I wouldn’t be able to tell if he was coming because he was really happy about being invited or because he was just being polite...”

“You’re right. If you were a shrewd girl who could take advantage of the opportunity and bring in the win, you wouldn’t be laid-back and shopping with me for dinner on the Sunday night before your suspension was over.”

“That’s exactly right...” Taiga dejectedly muttered as they slowly started to walk again.

He wanted to support Taiga in her love life, but the situation had become too messy. Taiga had gotten in a fight with the person who had rejected Kitamura, and that was why she was suspended. Naturally, Kitamura was indebted to Taiga, so there was no way he could deny anything Taiga asked of him. In other words, she had too much of an advantage, and it was unfair to the point that Taiga couldn’t make a move.

With Taiga, who was already dispirited at his side, Ryuuji became

disheartened himself. He definitely could never invite his own crush over on Christmas Eve, either.

The reasons he couldn't invite Minori were even simpler than Taiga's. First, it was because it was Christmas Eve. Frankly, that was just too much pressure. The twenty-fourth of December just held too significant of a romantic association in the entire world (or maybe it was just in Japan?). Of course, you'd want to ask your crush over because of the day it was, but if you were having a date on that day, then it had to be because you were confessing or proposing. He didn't think he could end the day with a, "Today was fun, wasn't it? Well, see ya later." And to confess to Minori, well—that was i-i-i-impossible. It was too quick and also impossible. The other reason he couldn't invite her over was more realistic. On Christmas Eve, which was the busiest time of the year for restaurants, Minori the workaholic would probably be at her part-time job.

"Ahh...even if inviting Kushieda over weren't impossible, staying at home would be boring. On the other hand, if we went out, there would probably be couples all over each other... Maybe we should go rent a DVD and watch it at your place."

"What?! What are you saying, you giant lecherous ma—"

Oh, can't do that, good girl, good girl. As soon as she began to yell at him, her mouth contorted and snapped shut. Taiga massaged the center of her forehead. Then she put on an amicable expression to rival Santa's.

"You and your giant libido. We can't do that. What are you saying? You're going to make sure you invite Minorin out. It's okay, you have me on your side. You have me—reborn as angel Taiga-sama, the cherub of love."

Yay, she mouthed as she put up a V sign for victory. Without thinking, Ryuuji let his genuine thoughts slip out of his mouth.

"You're grossing me out!"

Taiga even took that in stride as she put her hands together. "Say what you will. Right now, I'm a living Buddha."

"Are you trying to fake it like Kawashima?! And a Buddha! Weren't you supposed to be an angel?!"

“Ahh, an angel, right, an angel. The angel Taiga has resolved to even give away the clothes off her back to make sure everyone has a happy Christmas—even if she were to entirely strip herself in the end.”

“You said you’d strip yourself. I heard all of that. Then let’s have you do it!”

“Go ahead and do as you please! But make sure you put everything to good use! Anyway, you’re going to ask Minori out on a date for Christmas Eve! You definitely are! I, the angel Taiga, will go all out as the head of this production! Hee hee, I wonder if Santa’s watching~! I wonder if he’s seeing how determined I am to be good and pure~!”

Ryuuji didn’t even have the energy to poke fun at Taiga. To be frank, trying to understand her was too difficult. Plus, what was the point of raising the hurdle on a mission that already had a low chance of success? There wasn’t anything more dangerous than a determined Taiga—though he couldn’t say that out loud.

“Ryuuji, you have to put your heart into it! That’s right, because it’s Christmas! I want everyone to be happy! That’s why I need to be a good girl!”

Taiga’s hair shook as she swung her head up to see the lights, and her eyes glittered. It seemed that her determination had grown even firmer. In proportion to that, the level of danger was also steadily increasing.

“...I don’t need you to produce anything. Please stop, really.”

“Why?”

Ryuuji had cut the fuse short.

“Because it’d definitely be impossible! If I invite her out on a date on Christmas Eve, then she’ll know that I like her! It’s completely impossible! It’s too impossible! It’s too obviously suspicious! That’s not going to seem casual!”

“It’s not like it doesn’t not...doesn’t have to be not...doesn’t not have to be not... It’s not like you have to make it seem casual.”

She puffed out her chest in pride and lifted an eyebrow. The angel Taiga thrust a pale finger up in front of Ryuuji’s nose. *Whoa, that’s dangerous*, thought Ryuuji—if Taiga hadn’t been in angel mode, she might have thrust her

finger right up his nose, poking right at his brain.

“It’s fine if she knows. That’s right, you just need to take this opportunity to confess to her once and for all. It’s Christmas, so you have to tell her the thing you most want to tell her! You’ve got to be honest, Ryuuji! You have the spirits of me and Santa behind you!”

“C-c-c-con—you idiot! It’s not like I could do that! Whether you’re an angel or a Buddha, or Santa’s watching, the impossible is impossible!”

He was close to blowing a fuse. Ryuuji desperately shook his head. Of course, he wanted to tell Minori his feelings. He wanted to tell her outright that he liked her. On Christmas Eve, on the day for lovers, he wanted to let his long-unrequited love prosper.

But Ryuuji was too awkward and cowardly and pessimistic. He could only think of the bad things that could happen, like if his one-sided feelings caused a problem for Minori or if she cut off the small bond they had fostered until then. He couldn’t think that there was a happy future waiting for him after confessing. In that case, he thought that it was better to keep the status quo.

It’s fiiine, it’s fiiine, leave it to meee, Taiga whispered in a sing-song voice as she started walking in front of him. Then, in the middle of the busy crowd that was coming and going, she suddenly flipped around. He didn’t know what she was thinking, but she took the nibbled-on closet dehumidifier—actually it was just the doughnut ring—and hoisted it above her head.

“Hee hee, how’s it look? Don’t I look like an actual angel?”



“You don’t. Actually, you’re dropping crumbs on your head.”

“No way?! Waah...get them off, get them off!”

As he sighed at Taiga, who was so silly it was kind of sad, he batted at her hair whorl. The sweet-smelling crumbs dropped down in front of her nose and into her long hair. *What an idiot. Seriously.*

Well, though. How about it?

Putting aside her comments on staging a production for him, it might be nice to have Taiga be a “good girl” once during the year. Ryuuji looked down at Taiga, who was batting off the crumbs of doughnut that had fallen on her face, and couldn’t help but smile.

All of humankind probably wished for a happy Christmas.

“Ah! Tiger-san is here!”

“The Palmtop Tiger is back at school!”

“Tiger-saaan! Thank you for your hard work!”

Whoaaaaaaaaaaaa! The deep voices that rumbled like the earth echoed along with the boisterous sound of footsteps. Ryuuji automatically shrunk away and quickly moved to the outskirts of the corridor. That had been the right thing to do.

Taiga, who had arrived at school for the first time in two weeks, was surrounded on her right, her left, her front, and her back by a guy here, a guy there, another guy, and another...all of whom were part of the “Palmtop Tiger Fan Club.” It was another name for the group of male students who were obsessed with combat. The group of guys continued to turn their fevered gazes to the Palmtop Tiger, Aisaka Taiga, who possessed overwhelming power, natural fighting instincts, and a tyrannical, merciless nature overflowing with sadism. They actually had been aware of the club for a while. It had steadily grown in number, and during the pro wrestling event and Miss Festival contest at the culture festival, that growth exploded to the point that by the time anyone noticed, they had turned into a large and perverse corps.

“Hey, Takasu-kun, can you move a little?! Tiger-san, there’s something we want to ask you!”

“Whoa!”

Brushed aside, Ryuuji was pushed even further into the wall. In a split second, Taiga, whom he had come to school with, was surrounded by guys. Even though it was the middle of winter, he was stuck in the hot and sweaty crowd and the impassioned swirling eddy of hollers.

“Tiger-san! We just have to know! Can the Phantom Big Brother vs. Palmtop Tiger fight be counted as a victory for you?!”

“You knew the patriarch was going to go study abroad, so you went to settle things once and for all with a duel, right?! Whoa, what a passionate development!”

“We believed it was a victory for you, Tiger-san!”

What a mess... Ryuuji came to the realization as he was kicked out of the ring of passion. The nightmarish battle from two weeks ago had, it seemed, been chalked up to this among the students who hadn’t known the circumstances. The patriarch left amid rumors of the fight’s outcome, and Taiga had been suspended—but the fight didn’t happen for reasons as simple as that.

“Quiet!”

Whoaaa. The guys went silent at Taiga’s voice. Taiga raised a hand as if to settle those around her. They squinted at her like she was a brilliant object of worship and gratefully turned their heads up to her. Ryuuji held his breath. The normal Taiga would have screamed or hollered at them, torn them to pieces and punched them, punched them and torn them to pieces, kicked them up, stomped them down, maybe even spat on them, and ignored them after. But today, Taiga was different.

“That day’s battle was...an ordeal! A lot of things went down, and it was a close call!”

Caught up in her theatrics, she crossed her arms. She closed her eyes as though reminiscing.

The boys held their breath at Taiga's words. Then, Taiga stood imposingly in the middle of the ring they had formed and suddenly opened her eyes wide.

"Buuuuuuut!"

The guys were abuzz as they stood firmly at attention. *I see*, Ryuuji thought. This was also part of the special-edition Christmas good girl angel version of Taiga. Noting the approach of Christmas, Taiga the good girl was trying to make her troublesome fans happy.

"You oafs must also know this! The person who stands in the ring last is the winner! In other words, I am the true viiiiiictor!"

"You think you're Korosuke or something?!" Ryuuji was the only one poking fun at her.

"Whoooooaaaaaa!"

"We've got a declaration of victory at long last!"

"Our Tiger-san is number oooooone!"

Close to tears, the guys started setting off poppers that they seemed to have pre-prepared. They threw confetti. Amid the delighted claps and yells, they even naturally broke into a chorus for some reason, chanting "Weee are the champions..." Then they lined up along both ends of the hallway and put their hands high up together to create an aisle. They sent Taiga off to her classroom while passionately chanting "Tiger." The angel Taiga generously nodded in response to the maddening chorus as she walked steadily through the aisle.

"We're counting on you from now on!"

"Tiger-san, you're the best!" they said.

Even when they slapped her on the shoulders and back as though she were one of the guys, the pleasant smile on her rosy, flower-like lips did not fade.

"Please give me a whack!" some guy cried, putting his face out for her, and when she gave him a full-powered slap, the cheers grew even louder.

What is this? As Ryuuji tried to shift away, someone pushed at his back and said, "Takasu-kun, you go, too!" They pushed him into the aisle. He couldn't back out and so, somehow, he put his hands on Taiga's shoulders and followed

behind her. The two of them looked like an athlete entering the ring and her manager as they ended up walking among the Tiger chant and chorus. But, well, it was kind of fun—though it was all really just a sham. He didn't like what was happening.

“A-are you...really okay with this?!”

“Mwa ha ha ha ha! It's the best! I had no idea there were so many fans waiting for me to come back to school! I'm glad I wasn't expelled!”

“Tiger-san! Give me one, too!”

“My pleasure!”

SCHWIP! She gave the guy another sharp slap. The receiver rubbed at his swollen cheek and, naturally, tumbled down onto the floor. He did seem to have quite a happy look on his face, but it wasn't the time for them to be surrounded by the passion of guys like this.

“More importantly...you know what we have to do, right?!” said Ryuuji. “Let's get out of here and ditch these guys! We have to get to the classroom fast!”

“Oh, right, right. I know.”

Still connected together, they sped up and broke their way through the crowded, B.O.-filled aisle to head to class 2-C. Applause followed them in the background.

They were probably both worried about the same thing.

Minori hadn't been at their usual meeting spot where they always met in the morning. She wasn't there even though it was the day Taiga was coming back to school. They had cut it close, but they hadn't been running late. They hadn't even gotten an “I'm going ahead of you,” message from her. It was the first time something like this had happened. Could Minori have gotten sick and taken the day off, or had something else happened?

“I felt your heart...”

That was what Ryuuji was thinking the moment the classroom door opened. The shrill falsetto suddenly echoed over to him.

“...quiver like a thigh tendon's pulse...”

“Wh-what is this?!”

It was Kushieda Minori.

She had a blade of grass between her lips. Her butt was perched on top of someone’s desk.

Her face was red from the winter wind, and she wore a navy peacoat along with a checked tartan scarf over her uniform. It seemed like she had just gotten to school. The girl was singing like a castrato. Her eyes held the reflection of some ancient forest.

Ryuuji stood silent, but this wasn’t unusual enough to surprise Taiga, who was at his side.

“Minori!!!!!! I’m back at school! So stop singing that weird song and huuug meee!”

She hopped and went into a jumping hug to clutch at Minori, which caused Minori to lose her balance on the desk and start to roll off. Just as she was on the edge, she stopped herself from falling.

“Ugh...release me! I’m a human!”

“Minorin, Minorin, Miiiiinori!!!!!!”

“You must live! You’re also human!”

“Minorin, I love you! Gah!”

“Oh, I can’t resist you! Minorin loves you, too!”

As she staggered, she firmly held Taiga, the indulgent destructor of humanity. Minori pushed her nose up against the top of Taiga’s head and rubbed it around until her hair was a mess, squeezing Taiga with reckless abandon. Incidentally, Taiga was wearing a pair of winter tights (made with genuine 100 denier) and her gray duffle coat. She hadn’t stolen Ryuuji’s scarf that day but had instead protected her neck by stuffing her own hair into her coat.

“Seriously! Minorinnn! I seriously soooo wanted to see yooooouuu!”

Taiga buried her face in Minori’s neck, sounding like she was practically crying. She bumped Minori over and over again with her forehead, which

Minori took full against her chin. *Mwah mwah mwah*. Minori stamped Taiga's forehead with kisses.

"There, there! There, there! Your brains are in the same class as Rei! Oh, but I don't mean Ayanami Rei, okay? By Rei, I mean the giant cow from outer space! Boomo!"

"What? I'm not like that! More importantly, why didn't you come to school with us this morning?!"

"Well, honestly, I woke up late and had to scramble to school. That's why my thighs are spent... Actually, how did I overtake you and get to the classroom first when I had a late start?!"

Uhh, eh-hem, Ryuuji coughed to cover up his nervousness. *At the ready, Takasu Ryuuji! Step forward! Take aim! 3, 2, 1...fire!*

"O-oh, well, we got mobbed by these weird guys."

"Silence, boy!"

There it was—instant death!

Though it was a metaphor, Ryuuji really did die. The letters S-H-O-C-K were carved right into his chest. He was convinced that he had seen life after death. He had been told to be silent. Minori, who was always so happy and kind, had bared her teeth at him and told him that in the voice of Miwa Akihiro himself. He had been shunned...

The life in Ryuuji's face disappeared. His soul was ascending. As she saw what was happening before her eyes, still clutching Minori, Taiga couldn't help herself and snorted, "Bwaha!"

Minori, however, was flustered.

"Oh...whoa?! What'd I just say?! I couldn't have...made a mistake (in my choice) of joke?! I fudged it (I think)! I've reaaaally doone iiiiiit! Oh no (sorry)! Forget all about it (please)! Ahhhhhhhh, iiif onnnly I wereen't aaaaan idiiiooot... uh?"

She trembled and shook as she sang with gusto. Her face spasmed, but then suddenly she said, "Well, wait just a second?! This may have actually been a

stroke of luck!”

Her face lit up. It was as though she were leaving everything around her behind.

“See! Because I made that mistake, I need to show how I’ve reflected upon it! Yeah, that’s right, it was all made possible because I made this mistake! Ahh! How lucky I am! I can use this fair and square—my most prized possession, which I take with me everywhere! This is way too lucky!”

Pushed aside, Taiga plopped onto the floor. Without a care, Minori pulled out her bald cap from her bag and put it right on her head.

“See! See how lucky I am! Why, I’m on a streak! Things naturally worked out so I could wear it! I have such good fortune, I can’t believe it, uwaaaaaaaah!”

And with that, she started to cry.

Minori prostrated herself on the ground, still in her coat, and tossed aside her bag, all while still wearing her bald cap. Then she suddenly started blubbering like a man who had never cried once in his life.

“Mi...Minorin?! What’s wrong?!”

“Wai—Kushieda! At least get up! The floor is dirty!”

It wasn’t just Taiga and Ryuuji—naturally, those around them had also gathered to gawk. “What’s going on?” “Kushieda’s gone off her rocker again,” they whispered to each other.

“Yo, Takasu! Oh, Tiger! Been a while, hasn’t it, Tiger?! Kushieda, what are you doing?”

“Ohh, it’s Tiger! Yay, how’ve you been?! Did Kushieda break down again?!”

Noto and Haruta had also made their way over and patted Ryuuji on the shoulder. They looked down at Minori in her frantic state.

Still wearing her coat, Minori crouched on the cold floor with her head in her hands. “Maybe I really should shave my head...” She eventually raised her head and sneezed. Her face was still haggard and snotty from crying as she yelled desperately, “Ahh, I’m so glad I had my bald cap! I’ll keep this on for a while!”

With that, she really did stay in her bald cap for a while. She was in a bald cap despite being a high school girl in the full blossoming of youth.

Ryuuji didn't even know how to start poking fun at her. He was dumbfounded, robbed of his words. Taiga, in her own way, might have felt unsettled, too. Her chin jerked as she wordlessly mouthed, *Stop that*.

"My, my, my... Well, actually..."

With a manufactured voice that sounded strangely senile, Minori sniffed, wrinkled her brow, and drew circles on her bald cap with her finger. Ryuuji thought she was acting sort of cute... Wait, no... It wasn't actually cute. He wanted her to take off the bald cap, at the very least.

"Actually," she said, "yesterday I made this unbelievably stupid, kind-of-want-to-die-inside mistake during a softball game, and we lost to a team we should have won against...so I was already feeling awkward."

Ahhhhhh. The length of her protracted sigh easily conveyed the depths of her depression.

"So, I'm in terrible shape right now. I obsessed over it yesterday, and I just couldn't really get any sleep in the end...ugh, cough cough...I'm even losing my voice...sorry, and Taiga just came back to school today, too... I wanted to celebrate or something, but with the state my body is in, all I'll be is a burden... cough cough! Eek, it's blood~!"

Ryuuji and Taiga had no words for Minori, who had suddenly aged in front of them. Also, she wasn't even bleeding.

If she were her normal self, Minori would have at least prepared some fake blood to vomit, but instead she staggered toward her own desk, still in her bald cap. At the sight of that, Ryuuji was frustrated that he hadn't said anything to her.

He hadn't been able to say anything even though Minori was so down. And then he was immediately frustrated that he even thought that. What a selfish way of thinking. In the end, regretting that he hadn't been able to say anything to Minori while she was depressed was just regret that he hadn't been able to appeal to her with his kindness. He had really made it all about himself. Was

appealing to Minori more important to him than her pain?

No, he thought, *I really just genuinely wanted Minori to feel better*. But no matter how many times he told himself that, in the end, the truth was that he'd wanted to take advantage of Minori while she was down. He went in circles gloomily thinking that for a good three seconds and then breathed in. *Ahh*. He was acting just like Taiga did. The weaker his unrequited love was, the more he was paralyzed by it being unfair to make a move. Then he was dead in the water. In the end, he would become a heartless person who hadn't done anything when his crush was feeling down.

He was overthinking it—Taiga, too. They were both mired in the theoretical. *No, no, no, this won't work*.

He scratched his head and rubbed his eyes. For the time being, Ryuuji straightened his back. Whether it was unfair or not, whether he was taking advantage of her, whether she was in a bald cap—who cared? The quiver in his heart was real.

He approached Minori's seat.

"...Uh..."

"That's going to get stuffy."

Schwoop. He casually pulled off the bald cap.

Though his actions might have harbored ulterior motives that even he didn't know himself, he still wanted to show her he was worried about her. He would at least show her that. He would pretend he didn't see the parts of this that were unfair or about appealing to her or taking advantage of her state. He already had enough regrets about overlooking others' pain, and he wouldn't let it happen again.

For a moment, Minori looked up at Ryuuji and blinked as though she had seen something too bright. Their eyes met, or so he thought.

Ryuuji hid his nervousness and somehow awkwardly smiled at her.

Then, Minori averted her eyes from Ryuuji. Still not looking into his face, she took back her bald cap and put it away in her bag. "Hee hee hee, right you are.

Ain't no reason to wear a bald cap, is there?" She smiled. She smiled and then simply clammed up. He felt like something was off, for a moment.

"Aaaaaaaiiiiiisaaaaaakaaaaaaa!"

They practically jumped at the echoing scream. They turned around...

"Oh, Aisaka! You've finally been able to come back to school. Congratulations! The last two weeks without you were unbearably long... They were so boring without you! I really mean that!"

...And the new student council president Kitamura Yuusaku was straight as a board at Taiga's feet as he lay himself down in a scrupulous, fully horizontal bow. Was that really his best friend? Ryuuji felt slight dizziness at the scene.

"Ohhhhh m-m-m-my, K-K-K-K-Kitamura-kun. G-g-g-g-good morning."

Like a robot, Taiga haltingly lifted her right hand at the floor.

"Good morning! Oh, it's been so long since we've exchanged greetings like this, Aisaka! I'm so touched!"

Still on the ground, Kitamura lifted his refreshing, smiling face. Then he noticed Ryuuji was there, too.

"Oh, good morning, Takasu!"

"Why are you doing that?!"

"Because it's morning, of course!"

"No! I mean what's with that pose?!"

"Because prostrating myself just wouldn't be enough! My feelings towards Aisaka just couldn't be shown by just throwing myself on the ground at her feet! ...Right, Aisaka? I'm so sorry I was the reason you got suspended. I can't believe you risked sending your life into chaos because of me! And thank you. I was thinking that I wouldn't be able to stay in school after that huge embarrassment, but because of you, Aisaka, I'm still here. I've even started my work as president."

Still straight as an arrow in his recumbent bow, Kitamura looked directly up at Taiga. His eyes squinted as he gazed kindly over his glasses at her with a

peaceful smile.

“If there’s anything I can do to back you up, I’ll do it. So don’t ever get into a fight again, for anyone, ever. Not even if it’s for the sake of justice. If there’s something that you just can’t get over, then come to me first.”

Taiga said, “Ahhhh...”

And then she fainted.

“Whoa! Keep it together, Taiga! You’ve barely been scratched!”

Ryuuji quickly stepped in from behind as she fell. He slapped her cheeks. Kitamura’s sincerity had been too strong. He checked to see that her eyelashes were moving faintly. Good, she was alive.

“Breathe slowly...right...calm down...”

“Phoo...haaa...phooo...haaa.”

Ryuuji braced Taiga with his knee and desperately tried to bring her back to her senses by patting her shoulder. That was when it happened.

“...?!”

He was certain he felt someone’s eyes on his back. It wasn’t just one pair, but several. He whirled around as though he were a murderous demon attempting to hunt all life on earth single-handedly, but...

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

...he was met with silence and the backs of several people’s heads.

Well, must have been my imagination! Or so he wished. Ryuuji’s forehead furrowed. *What is this?*

Pretty much everyone in the class had turned their backs to Ryuuji, Taiga, and Kitamura all at once. Their silence was as good as a confession. It wasn’t as

though this were normal, but even Noto and Haruta were letting their gazes wander in a strange direction. They had nothing to say.

This couldn't be...bullying? At the moment that thought entered his mind, he heard Kitamura's easygoing voice.

"And so, I've started being a patron saint of broken hearts!"

Bam! Taiga fell off of Ryuuji's knee upon hearing those cryptic words. If this were the first he had heard of it, Ryuuji would have fallen over with Taiga, too. But that wasn't the case. Yes, Kitamura had already proclaimed his intentions of being a patron saint. The idea of it was so stupid that Ryuuji hadn't found it in himself to tell Taiga while she was suspended.

Right in that moment, before the class was about to begin, a knock came at the door.

"Umm, excuse me... I'm looking for the patron saint of broken hearts..."

"Hey! I'm right over here!"

Kitamura smoothly rose from his prostrated position and lifted a cheerful hand at the girl who was peeking into the classroom. She looked like she was an underclassman. Taiga was practically in a panic as she watched him head toward the fidgeting girl.

"You became...a patron saint...? That doesn't happen in a day...but...but wh-wh-wh-wh-wha?! That. Little. Girl. Is. So. Sh-sh-sh-sh-sh-shameless!"

Taiga had her teeth bared as she trembled all over; blood-red murder overflowed from her eyes. She continued watching the girl who had called on Kitamura as though she were about to kill and eat the student, but then grew flustered, shook her head, and bit her lip.

"...Oops! I almost forgot! Good girl, good girl..."

Only her eyes stayed pinned to the two and refused to budge.

The girl, who was unaware she had narrowly escaped death because of Taiga's good-girl week, reverently bowed her head to Kitamura.

"I can't find the courage to confess... Please help me..."

Then Kitamura, the patron saint of broken hearts, said, “Hmmm... It’s okay. Have faith and your dreams will come true. Don’t hesitate and go for it!”

“But...I don’t have confidence in myself...and I’m not even pretty...”

“Don’t think about it! Go for the soap!”

“The wha? ...Huh?”

“Don’t think too deeply about it.” Kitamura mumbled, chanted something over the girl’s head, and bowed. The girl bowed back and left.

“Huh...?” Taiga tilted her head so steeply that her face almost seemed to rotate completely. She couldn’t figure out what had happened at all.

That was right. While Taiga had been out on suspension, a lot of things had gone down at school.

“What is this, Ryuuji...”

“Well, actually, since Kitamura made that huge confession earlier, he’s been kind of like the leader of a love cult—it’s like, he’s what people believe in when they want to confess to someone else...”

Oh, is he really?! Taiga was surprised, but she immediately followed with, “But he got rejected!”

That certainly was true. A rarity for Taiga: the gears in her petite brain had turned and worked it out.

“That’s exactly why he’s a patron saint. It’s kind of like Kitamura absorbs all the bad stuff.”

“So it’s basically like an exorcism.”

Noto poked his head in and continued the explanation. “Well, the old student council really had some character to it, right? So, it’s kind of like he’s giving the council a new look by really pushing himself as the ‘patron saint of broken hearts.’ That’s been two today. It gets ridiculous after school. They make lines in front of the student council room. The council’s even getting into it. They made this shrine-like thing in the doorway. It looks like they’re really getting him into the role of a patron saint.”

“Whaat~?! Really? I had no idea! Isn’t Kitamura kind of amazing?!” said Haruta.

“What did you think Kitamura was doing up until now?” Noto poked fun at him. Completely ignoring Haruta, Taiga had a weird look on her face. She watched quietly as the patron saint of broken hearts returned to the group.

“...How about we try giving it a go?” Ryuuji whispered into her ear.

She nodded slightly.

“Yeah.”

Taiga and Ryuuji sneakily put their hands together as though they were praying. They bowed their heads slightly to the patron saint. Of course, each of them was thinking about—

“What, even you guys? Is there someone you want to confess to?”

“Oh, guess you spotted us,” said Ryuuji. “I don’t, but I thought ‘Hey, why not?’”

“Same,” said Taiga. “Why not?”

“Okay! Get the soap!”

Like I will... Ryuuji closed his eyes slightly and Taiga scratched her nose. Looking between their faces, suddenly Noto said, “Actually, Tiger, you kind of seem quiet today. Are you laying low because it’s your first day back from suspension or something?”

He measured the distance between them as he carefully said those words.

“Oh, you noticed?” Taiga replied. “That’s right. I’m being a good girl right now.” *Ehee!* She smiled at Noto with an extra helping of cuteness.

Noto might have been surprised or scared. “Wow,” he said. His glasses slipped down his nose; he seemed incredibly startled.

“It’s almost Christmas, so I decided I would be a good girl. Because, look, Santa is definitely watching...DAH-EH!”

Taiga was suddenly flung straight forward. She knocked desks and chairs into disarray and got entangled in several people, Noto included, before she rolled

over onto the ground, the butt of her tights completely visible.

“Kya ha ha ha ha ha ha. ☆ Isn’t that stupid?! Santa! She’s going on about Santa! I can’t believe that word is coming out of your mouth~! It. Doesn’t. Suit. You! Kya ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! ☆ Actually, it’s been a really long time since I’ve seen you~! I heard your suspension was super hilarious~!”

Ryuuji didn’t have to look to know who the culprit was.

She had sent Taiga flying by hitting her in the butt with her bag. Her hair flowed smoothly as she pushed it up and laughed.

The beauty’s name was Kawashima Ami. Her slender, perfect proportions were made for modeling, and every feature of her incredibly petite face was perfectly shaped in exactly the right way. Every part of her was radiant and smooth. She sparkled with the aura of a gem as she walked over.

Ami, however, had an overwhelmingly bankrupt personality. To Taiga, who was reputed as being the strongest, most terrifying presence at school, Ami could be called an old rival. After being hit in the butt and sent flying, of course it would have been Taiga’s turn for revenge next. But...

“It’s been a while, Dimhuahua...”

“...Oh?”

But Taiga greeted Ami as she got back up. Of course, she wasn’t smiling, but she did peacefully wave her hand. It wasn’t that she was waiting for a chance to strike with the sharp knife hidden up her sleeve. Or with a poison needle between her fingers! Or with a frog in her ballet shoes! Or with a metal basin coming from above! She wasn’t trying to do any of those things.

Taiga stubbornly kept her grace and poise.

“Dimhuahua, it’s almost Christmas. If you keep being a Badhuahua, Santa won’t visit you. See, I’m a good girl, so we’ll compromise. We’ll pretend you just gave me a morning greeting and let it go. So, don’t fight until Christmas. I love Christmas. During this precious, beautiful time of year, I don’t want to have a fight for no good reason.”

“Kyaah!”

Ami screamed when Taiga grasped her hand and desperately shook it off. As though her right hand had rotted in Taiga's grasp, she looked at it and shrieked, shook it around, and opened her eyes wide enough for them to seem like they were about to pop right out.

"You're definitely acting weird! Did something happen to you while you were suspended?! You're weird, weird, weird, weird, weird! There's definitely something fishy going on! Oh, I know! Do you have one day left to live or something?! No way, that's miserable!"

"Why are you saying the same thing as Ryuuji... Why do you all think I'm sick or dying when I'm trying to be good? I don't understand you at all. I'm just doing this because it's almost Christmas. I think you should stop acting like that, Dimhuahua. Because look, Santa is going to be flying over Japan soon..."

"Nooooooooooooooooo!"

Ami's genuine scream echoed throughout the classroom even louder than Taiga's words. Then, she genuinely gagged.

"Why are you talking about Santa like you believe in him? It's gross, gross, gross, gross! Actually, oh! I figured it out! You're trying to use this as an opportunity to change how people see you, aren't you?! Uwah! That's scary, you mongrel! We don't have an opening for an angel here! And like, next week I was planning on saying, 'I love Christmas. ☆ I've believed in Santa even through junior high. ☆ Aren't I stupid?! ☆' What do you think you're doing, stealing my thunder?! Huh?! It's seriously damn scary when you've got your eyes wide open like that, you harebrain!"

It's okay, Ami-chan, it's good that your purity's all fake, it's good when the ferocious real side of you comes out every once in a while, ahh, crack your whip, use it to tie us up and make our lives a living hell...

Ami ignored the whispering boys who had slipped in behind her.

"Ha! Actually...I get it now!" She lifted her face and gulped. "You're on drugs..."

She started to pretend to shake uncontrollably.

"That's it! That's what it is! It's drugs! You're on drugs! No waaaaay, that's

soooooo scary! That has to be it! No way, ahhh, that's terrible! What's gotten into yooooouuu~?!"

It seemed she had decided what was going on for herself. She twisted her body around and let her large eyes glisten with tears. She put her hands on her cheeks and her ironclad cute girl mask evaporated. Her mask changes were on an entirely different level from Taiga's apprentice-level "good girl" act.

"Come to your senses!" said Taiga. "...Just kidding. Oh, Dimhuahua, what are you doing?!"

"So, I'll examine all your belongings. ♥ This is definitely, definitely suspicious. Let me see..."

Ami grabbed Taiga's bag, which had been lying on the ground. She pulled it open, but her movements were overexaggerated as though she were joking around.

"Oh no, oops!"

"Ahhh! Seriously, what are you doing, Dimhuahua! I'll kill you...or not."

She had let the contents of Taiga's bag fall all over the ground. *No waaay, no, no!* Ami quickly crouched down and started gathering all the stationery and other materials from the floor. Even Ryuuji couldn't help but take part in the terrible spectacle.

"Seriously, what do you think you're doing?" he asked. "You're basically happy that your fighting partner Taiga is back at school, right? Just be honest."

"No way, Takasu-kun. Good. Mor. Ning. ♥ Why are you saying something so gross? I'll. Kill. You. ♥ Actually, would you please get that~?"

With an angel's smile, Ami had Ryuuji go after a pen that had rolled all the way to the wall. Then she handed the restored bag right over to Taiga.

"Oh, this, too. I'll put this right here."

At the very end, Ami stuck Taiga's student notebook into the back pocket of her bag. Taiga muttered something grim and exasperated to herself.

"Wait," she said, "no, I can't do that, good girl, good girl..." She forced a flimsy smile onto her face and took the bag from Ami.

Someone came up behind Ami.

“Oh, wow... Ami-chan, you really are super nice...”

Kashii Nanako, who had come with Ami to school, smiled wryly as she whispered to Ami.

“Huh~!” said Ami. “What are you talking about~? Oh, come to think of it, I brought that limited-edition lip gloss. Nanako, you’ll try it on? Oh, right. Maya, you said you wanted to see it, too, right? ♥ Let’s try it.”

“Oh, I do, I do! Maayaa, let’s go!”

Beckoned by the two of them, Kihara Maya passed by Minori’s seat and exchanged words with her.

“Huh? Why do you have a bald cap, Kushieda? That’s so funny!”

“You want to put it on?” said Minori. “Wanna borrow it?”

“Actually, why do you sound so nasally? That’s super funny!”

“I was crying earlier.”

“Why were you crying? That’s actually so totally funny!”

Pulling at Maya’s arm, the usual group of three boisterous and beautiful girls moved to Ami’s seat. Like normal, the sweet and energetic voices of class 2-C’s official gorgeous trio brilliantly filled the classroom before school began.

Chapter 2

“So, then I asked the associate professor, ‘Where are you right now?’ He said he was at the café in front of the station. And then he said, ‘There’s something I really need to finish right now, so can we push back the time?’ But when he replied, I was already at that café... I thought it was weird, so I tried to casually ask him if he had gotten a good window seat, and then he said, ‘Yeah, I did.’ He said, ‘I’m sitting at a great seat by the window, ha ha.’ ...But I was already sitting at the only window seat...”

“Oh ho. So he’s already lying for no reason. That’s no good.”

“I was thinking he was probably meeting other women or something. At the same time, it wasn’t like we were actually dating yet, so I couldn’t just ask him about it out of the blue. I thought he might make great boyfriend material, plus we’re around the same age. I was thinking he might have been sorting things out

before we could go official. Anyway, he told me he’d be late by an hour, so I knew I couldn’t stick around the café.”

“You didn’t want to let him know you were on to his lie.”

“Right. We weren’t at that stage where I could rock the boat. So, anyway, I left the station and stepped into the rain. If I had an hour, I thought I could go to a bookshop or look at clothes to pass the time. Um, it was that Saturday when it was freezing...”

“Ahh, it was cold that day. The rain was so cold it was practically close to turning into snow.”

“Right. I only had a small umbrella, so my clothes and shoes got soaking wet, and while I was walking, I was thinking, ‘Well, what do I do now?’ and then...I saw him!”

“Oh ho! Where was he and what was he doing?!”

“He was gambling on slot machines!”

Uhh...

There was a slight commotion in class 2-C as they murmured in low voices. The students had been chowing down heartily during lunch but automatically stopped at the incredibly strange conversation currently being broadcast over the loudspeakers.

“This is it, right? He should have been reading at the café, but you caught him on the slots. He was playing slots even though you were supposed to meet, to the point that he made his own date wait for him.”

“So then I was thinking, ‘This is way too much.’ There are limits to what you can ignore. I didn’t want to hear his excuses, either, or hear him lie, so I decided to wait for him to leave the building.”

“You didn’t think of marching in there?”

“Of course not. I wouldn’t do that. I’m an adult. I just stood in the rain, but he never left. An hour passed, but he still didn’t leave. I was just glued to the ground. There wasn’t even an overhang. I was in the middle of the street at eight o’clock at night. Thirty minutes passed and he still didn’t come out. He was already an hour late. I was like, he’s not even going to bother to tell me? Actually, were slot machines more important than me to begin with? But the more I waited, the more I felt something dark building up in me, and I couldn’t bear going home frustrated and sad like that... It was so cold, and I was more pitiful and miserable the colder it was, so I thought he’d at least feel bad if he saw me...”

“Hmmm... So, you didn’t get in contact?”

“I did...with my girlfriend. I was telling her, you won’t believe what the associate professor did to me, and I’m crying, what do I do~? Then I realized something that changed everything...”

“It must have been a development that put you at the edge of your seat, right?”

“Apparently Japanese universities don’t even have associate professors anymore... They call them senior lecturers now. Suddenly, I was like, ‘Who is this guy?’ right?”

“Right. It’s like everything you knew about him was suddenly overturned.”

“So then he ghosted me. But I finally got why everything was so weird. It’s because Mercury is in retrograde!”

“Oh...Mercury is...”

“Right! Mercury is! When Mercury is in retrograde, your computer breaks or things you thought would happen end up coming late! So once things are back in order—oh, it’s supposed to be at the beginning of next year—I think he’ll get in contact with me again! Don’t you think he will? You think so, too, right?”

“Well...yeah, that is something, honestly I think...maybe you should pass on this guy?”

“If there ever is a next guy! But that’s not the point! It’s not! En-nee-way, I just wanted to give him a piece of my mind! Hraagh!”

“Oh. Oh, ahh...if you strain yourself like that, you’ll make yourself hyperventilate...”

“Right?! And then he came out of the gambling parlor, right?! And then he saw me, right?! And then he isn’t even surprised or awkward about it, and the first thing that comes out of that guy’s mouth is, ‘So you were following me?! So that’s the kind of person you are! You’re the worst! That’s why you’re still single at your age!’ That was what he saaaaaiid! That’s what I wanted to say to him! Like what are you doing pretending you’ve got a better job than you actually do at your age?! What is it wit’ chuu?! ...Ha ha...I’m talking like Shimura...ahhh...ughhh ahhhhh...”

“So, we’ve gotten to the end of your story. Let’s hope Mercury goes back into alignment. Let’s end this here today. Thank you very much. Here, take a tissue... You have afternoon classes, so wipe away those tears. Your makeup is...uhhh, I’m here on the radio with Sin Gle-san (age 30).”

“It’s Y-chan.”

“Oh, sorry. So Y-chan (age 30), if you have anything else you’d like advice about, please come to the ‘Patron Saint of Broken Hearts Restaurant’ any time and let us hear your story. The student council is cheering on your love. So at Y-chan’s (age 30) request, please listen to this...”

A weird, nostalgic winter song came flowing through the speakers.

Finally, someone reasonably muttered, “Kitamura, what are you doing making our homeroom teacher cry...?”

Since Kitamura had his awakening as the patron saint of broken hearts, he started occupying the broadcast room with the student council. The speakers streamed a student council-controlled broadcast throughout the school called “Cheering on Your Love.” Kitamura would somehow find students who would anonymously ask for romantic advice or start talking about his own love story. That day’s topic was about not being married and a familiar guest had successfully gotten a call back—class 2-C’s homeroom teacher (K)gakubo (Y)ri (age 30, (S)ngle). The show’s painful rating was going up by the day. The class started sympathizing with her.

“We’ll pretend that we didn’t realize it was Yuri-chan.”

“...Yeah.”

Even the usually juvenile girls were acting like adults. On the other side of things, though...

“Hey, hey Ryuuji... I wonder where they’re keeping the master tape for this broadcast. If we can figure that out, we can sneak in in the middle of the night, get it, and edit just the parts where Kitamura is talking...then right before I sleep everyday...na-haa...”

...there was one girl hugging herself and getting hot and bothered. Her large eyes glinted with ambition and her rough breathing made her nostrils flare. Across from her, with his bento spread out, Ryuuji said, “Here it comes.”

He wasn’t gloating about having obtained new abilities—“Here it comes, the cursed poison smoke from my eyes!”—he was just exasperated by the girl in front of him.

“Weren’t you supposed to be a good girl until Christmas? Now you’re suddenly plotting larceny... I can see the greed clouding your eyes.”

“Well, you just make it sound bad.”

Taiga crossed her arms and languidly closed her eyes with their long lashes.

“First of all, I think you’re in the wrong, Ryuuji, for not telling me such a

wonderful lunch broadcast started. You should have been recording it for me.”

“If I told you about it, you would have wanted to listen to it. And if I recorded it in class, I would have looked like an idiot. I thought that telling you about it while you were suspended would be mean, so I was trying to be considerate.”

“Oh, no, no. You don’t get it at all. You have no idea what it means to be considerate. Plus, you’re being all smug, as if you’d done a good thing. There’s nothing more conceited than that. Your personality is like an old man who thinks a good day is putting a pile of salt on top of a slug and watching it melt while the sun sets. Even your face is abnormal. You’ve got the immoral face of someone who really is just a dog at heart. But I won’t scold you right now, Ryuuji. I won’t punch you or kick you. I won’t beat you up or strangle you or kill you, even. I won’t even insult you by saying you’re useless. Isn’t that amazing? Aren’t I doing a great job acting like a good girl? Ehee.”

“I’ve had enough, so stop already!”

Ryuuji dropped his chopsticks in despair. *My personality is like putting salt on a slug!*

Taiga completely ignored him and blew her bangs up with a small sigh.

“But it really is a bummer. Well...it’s not like I can really go in to steal it in the middle of the night. I just want to somehow get my hands on Kitamura’s beautiful voice, since I missed it while I was suspended. I want to be able to fast-forward it to the places I want to listen to and customize it to my liking. I just want to listen to my very own version of Kitamura-kun’s voice, all for me...”

Pat. As Taiga was saying that, someone tapped her shoulder.

“Tiger, if this helps, I’ll let you have it.”

Taiga almost shot into the air as she realized someone had overheard her uber-embarrassing conversation. It had also surprised Ryuuji, since the students who had come to talk to Taiga were some girls she really wasn’t that close to. The girls handed Taiga a CD.

“I’m part of the broadcast committee. Maruo asked me to record the lunch broadcasts every day. I only have the recordings for up to yesterday, but if you want them, I’ll give them to you.”

Ryuuji and Taiga automatically exchanged looks and stopped thinking for several seconds.

“Uh wh-wh...huh? Wh-why...?”

Taiga eventually squeezed out a question. The answer was concise.

“Well, we just happened to hear you say you wanted to listen to it. I just brought the backup CDs today, too. So...”

“Yeah, right, right. We also recorded today’s broadcast, and we’re planning on recording all the future ones. If you want them, we can make copies for you. The broadcast is kind of fun to listen to, after all. It’s pretty funny.”

They pushed the CD into Taiga’s hesitating, shaking hands. Taiga’s cheeks flushed red, and she kicked her chair back in a fluster as she stood.

“Uh-um-um...”

For a moment she looked back at Ryuuji as though imploring him. *Say it*, Ryuuji urged her with his hand.

“Th-thank you...”

She twisted and fidgeted. Taiga was shy as shy could be when she finally whispered the words in a low voice. The girls smiled and waved their hands at her.

“It’s nothing, really. Think of it as a gift for celebrating the end of your suspension.”

“Right, yeah. If you weren’t here, Tiger, school just wouldn’t be fun. Isn’t it great that you got to come back?”

They returned to their seats where they had their bento spread out. Taiga was in rigor mortis for a while after that, but suddenly, as though she had come to a decision about something, she nodded. She pulled out a box of snacks from her desk, went after the girls, and thrust it out at them.

“...Nn!”

She said.

“Oh! Thank you! These are really good.”

“I love these, too! I’ll take one, too.”

Then as she went back to where Ryuuji was sitting with her nostrils flared. She cradled the CD and squinted her eyes as her face went red. Even her neck turned a warm-looking pink.

“D-d-did you see that just now?! I can’t believe I got so lucky?! Is this really okay?! I’m too happy!”

She squealed as she stomped on Ryuuji’s feet under the desk. Incidentally, this wasn’t an attack, but like when an overjoyed cat head-butts its owner. Ryuuji could only grin and bear it.

“That really was lucky,” he said. “The girls treat you way nicer than I’d have expected. I wonder if it’s with the blessing of the patron saint? Anyway, now you don’t need to steal it.”

“Yeah!”

Taiga took a big bite of lettuce fried rice that was loaded with mini tomatoes. Ryuuji also took a huge bite of the same meal across from her. Of course, the lunches were perfectly made that day, as they were every day. It had acidity from the tomatoes and crunch from the lettuce. With one egg per person, the finishing touch was scallops from a can. They also had Szechuan pickles and peppers and stir-fried chicken breast as sides. They had cucumber and seaweed salad topped with special sesame dressing, and afterward, they had mandarin jelly for dessert. The bento were a little lavish that day. Ryuuji put his heart into them, since it was the first day after Taiga’s suspension.

Even though they were having a special lunch, Minori wasn’t in the classroom because of a club meeting. That was the only disappointing part about it.

“I got it! I got it! I got it! Ehee hee!”

Dancing a little, Taiga dug into her fried rice. She genuinely seemed happy, and her eyes squinted. He watched her face to divert him from his ennui.

“I fiiiinally got my bread! The school store was packed!”

“Is Kitamura on the radio today, too~? What is that? Today’s song is ancient.”

“Don’t say that. Our homeroom teacher picked it.”

“Geh, that’s kind of sad.”

Noto and Haruta, the bread brigade, pulled chairs up to Ryuuji’s desk. There were three guys at just two desks and the person at the small edge would have to be scrunched up, but well, that was just how it was. Lunch was still fun. The song finally ended and Kitamura’s somewhat fake-sounding voice came back on over the speakers.

“So, today’s high is eight degrees Celsius, and today’s low is three degrees. We seem to be in the dead of winter now. The wind is cold, and the air is dry... That seems pretty terrible, and influenza is burning its way through...”

Shut up, Noto joked as he nibbled his bread. Ryuuji and Haruta laughed. Taiga had her ears pricked. She stretched out her neck like a turtle in order to greedily pick up Kitamura’s voice.

“Speaking of things to hate, end-of-term exams are closing in on us. Are you all ready? Actually, I, the patron saint of broken hearts, too, am getting ready to seriously get down to business with these tests...aha! Things aren’t going exactly as planned, though.”

“What did he just say?!” Haruta suddenly burst out. “Isn’t this broadcast nagging us?! Why is he talking about studying for tests?! Isn’t the title ‘Cheering on Love’?!”

“Hey, hey, calm down,” said Noto. “What’s gotten into you so suddenly? We can’t hear Master Kitamura’s much-appreciated broadcast. Right, Tiger? You okay? Can you hear it okay?”

He turned to Taiga, who nodded as her forehead furrowed. *Taiga and Noto are acting really buddy-buddy*, thought Ryuuji, *almost like they’re real friends. Noto, are you taking advantage of Taiga being in Christmas mode...?* No, he couldn’t let thoughts like that go through his head. His maddened eyes flashed at the heartwarming scene.

Haruta obstinately shook his head, “No, no.” He had been smiling right up to that moment, but now he tore off a piece of his fried noodle bread and shook his long hair gloomily.

“I don’t want to hear about studying! You don’t either, right, Noto?! Right,

Taka-chan?! Tiger, you too, right?! Hey, I hate studying! This might be a surprise to you, but I actually don't want to think about studying for even one second!"

"Hey!" said Ryuuji. "You got aonori seaweed from your mouth on my desk... Wh-where are my antibacterial wipes..."

"This isn't the time to be cleaning up aonori, Taka-chan! Stop it! Actually, what's with you, Tiger?!"

Haruta unexpectedly aimed his anger at Taiga. Normally, he would have immediately received capital punishment—death in two seconds, ascension in five seconds, and reincarnation after ten. He would have been a crying newborn in a new world by now. However, it was right before Christmas.

"What about me...?"

Taiga simply looked up slightly gloomily at the long-haired idiot. Ryuuji really believed that the person Haruta needed to be most grateful for in the world was definitely Santa. Then, getting carried away, the idiot thrust a finger at Taiga and bared his aonori-covered teeth at her.

"When I bought bread earlier, the head of our year stopped me and told me, 'Hey, you idiot over there!' And then he suddenly told me off for being the closest to failing our year and said I needed to study for the exams! So then I was like, 'But Tiger's been suspended! She has to be in a worse place than me~!' and he was like, 'You're the one who's worse, ya dunce! Ya dumb king!' Then he got even madder! Boo! Aha ha ha ha ha! Don't you think it's kind of funny?! Who's ever heard of a dumb king?!"

Ryuuji asked Noto with his eyes, "For real?" Noto quietly nodded in response. Taiga continued to be silent as she looked at King Haruta. Ryuuji wondered what she was thinking.

Eventually, she slowly put her fingers together and prayed to the heavens. "May this idiot also have a happy Christmas..."

"Kyaahaaaaa?!" It wasn't the sound of the angel's trumpets that interrupted her prayer, but the high squeal of Hayashiya Pah-ko. No, not really—it was just Haruta's ultrasonic voice.

"What is it with you, Tiger?! Sometimes you really can be nice! Ahh...no way, I

don't really know why, but I feel like I'm getting a—"

Shwick! At that moment, Noto's unexpectedly sharp karate chop hit Haruta in the neck. Haruta simply fell out of his chair, and his head slumped. *There*, Noto nodded. He gently took the fried noodle bread out of Haruta's hands and placed it on the desk.

The two boys gave each other a thumbs up. Taiga, still with bits of rice at the corner of her mouth and alone in her ignorance of what had happened, looked at Haruta, who sagged over like he had lost power. Then, she turned to Noto.

"What was that just now? What was he trying to say?"

"You don't need to worry about it! It's nothing for a girl to think about! More importantly, don't you think we should really start studying for the end-of-semester exams? Let's get together at a family restaurant and do it. Plus, we need to force Haruta to study or something or he won't be able to go up a grade with us. Also, Takasu, I want you to let me copy that thing you have. Would that be okay? I mean the patriarch's notes."

"Oh, right, of course. They really are great. Let's pass them along and use them together. Oh, they're not just mine though. You should probably ask Kushieda, too."

The patriarch's notes.

During the cultural festival at the end of fall, Ryuuji and Minori had received them as the prize for the lucky man race. Noto was referring to the comprehensive notes on every subject covered in school that the past student council president had left behind. As the representative of their victory, Ryuuji had kept the notes, but formally he co-owned them with Minori. He hadn't participated in the race to get the notes in the first place, but when he had gotten them and looked them over, he was shocked. Obviously, they contained all the school lessons, but they had even broken down all the hard topics in manageable and easy-to-understand ways. They had been organized better than real reference books sold on the market. After seeing that, Ryuuji understood. Kitamura's former love, the genius patriarch, had been blessed with brains, but she hadn't shirked the hard work needed to continue polishing her heavensent talent. She was the real deal.

At Ryuuji's pleasing reply, Noto said, "Thank you! Aren't we lucky, Haruta?! Right!" He shook his friend's shoulder. Haruta still hadn't come back to consciousness, so his long arms flailed futilely by his thighs. Then Noto turned around and continued, "Actually, Tiger, you're lucky your suspension ended before the exams. They're next week, so you've got to study with us, too. See, um, well, look... Let's invite Kitamura or something, and we can all do it together. Right? Let's start right away tonight?"

"Uh!"

At his words, Taiga looked up at Ryuuji with radiant eyes. It was as though she were trying to say, *Did you hear that just now?!* He had indeed heard it. Noto said he would invite Kitamura to their study group. Taiga somehow held back the joy that was about to overflow onto her face, but her eyes glittered, and her cheeks puffed up and turned peachy. "I-I-I-I-I wouldn't mind," she answered in a low voice as though trying to stifle her smile. Noto grinned and nodded.

"Oh, right, we could invite Minorin, too, right?! Because the notes are also hers! Right, Ryuuji?!"

Taiga seemed so excited she was close to humming to herself. "Right!" She looked into Ryuuji's face. If there weren't others watching, Ryuuji would have replied by saluting Taiga the angel for steadily cheering him on.

...For some reason, though, Ryuuji felt like something weird was up as he stared intently at Noto from the side.

"Hm? What is it, Takasu?"

"...Nothing."

"Huh? When I look really closely at your face, you kind of look like the Joker card from a deck we have at home..."

"Yeah, people sometimes tell me that."

Noto looked kind of like an otter—but that didn't matter right now. He was convinced Noto was up to something that day. Regardless of whether Taiga was being a good girl because Christmas was coming, and no matter how refreshing it was to see her since her suspension had lifted, Noto just seemed like he was being too frank with Taiga. He had suddenly invited her to a study group... No, it

wasn't just that. There were other things that were definitely even weirder. Right, Noto had been acting weird recently, and—

“Oh, Minorin! Over here! You're late! We already finished eating!”

He shot around.

In a fleeting second, Ryuuji's consciousness flew away. His scattered consciousness was pulled towards the figure of a girl as it pieced itself together into a vaguely human shape. All of the thoughts he had been putting together were lost, and he was restructured into a simple boy, idiotically in love.

“Sorry, sorry. The meeting ran long.”

The smile she turned to Taiga. The skip in her step. In the familiar classroom, Minori alone stood out brilliantly, and her outline seemed to glow. Her form, her voice, her scent stole Ryuuji's heart with a terrific power. He looked down at his bento box as though to dredge up the remains of his food and averted his eyes, trying to pretend he didn't even realize Minori was there. As though he were gulping down the words he wanted to say to her, he accidentally chugged down all of his oolong tea.

“Minorin,” said Taiga, “did you finish eating your bento, too?”

“I scarfed down some bread!”

“Then let's eat dessert together!”

“Fine by me!”

Taiga shook the box of sweets at Minori. She smiled and started to motion as though she were heading over to them.

“So Minorin, we were just talking about how tonight we were going to... Minorin, why are you backing away?”

“Aw shucks, I can't get the huge things between my legs to settle right, aw shucks.”

With a strangely skilled moonwalk, she retreated further and further away.

“Ah, that's a gross joke! That's low, Kushieda!” Noto booed at her.

Ryuuji's face contorted like a poisoned ogre's, and his eyes flashed hair-

raisingly. His fist shook with the hidden power of a man. From his dry lips came a low voice fit for addressing a sworn enemy, laden with killing intent: “Guess we’ve got Saigo Takamori in the house.”

YES! Just in his heart, Ryuuji shouted for joy. He had successfully made a casual comeback at Minori. However Minori smiled weakly as she continued her moonwalked retreat.

“Aw shucks, I-I-I—”

She got further and further away from them with smooth movements that didn’t make it seem like she had anything between her thighs. Minori didn’t stop, even when people got mad at her for running into them, “Heeey,” and even when her butt bumped into someone’s desk. Taiga, Noto, and Ryuuji were about to make fun of her with a collective cry of, *Where are you going?* when Kitamura’s voice came running through the speakers and a Christmas song started playing in the background.

“So, anyway. After the tough exams, the day everyone has been waiting for will arrive—Christmas.”

Ryuuji saw Taiga’s expression blossom into a smile when she noticed. Her beloved Kitamura had started talking about her beloved Christmas. Of course she would be in a good mood.

“I have an announcement from the student council. Once the end-of-term exams are over, we’ll have our closing ceremony on Christmas Eve, the twenty-fourth. After that, we’ll go to the gym and have a Christmas party for all those interested!”

It was in that moment that everything happened.

The cacophony of the noisy lunch break came to a sudden halt. Taiga’s mouth was wide open. Even Haruta had regained consciousness and opened his eyes.

This is... This is—! Ryuuji held his breath. He automatically exchanged looks with Taiga.

“This is, of course, for the couples out there,” said Kitamura, “and you, with the romantic troubles... It’s also for you, the one who hasn’t been able to ask out the person who caught your eye. Why don’t you ask out that special

someone you've been thinking about this romantic Christmas Eve? We're creating a prep committee and are waiting for your help. Please keep a look out for our fundraising campaign, too. The student council supports your love."

Kyaaaah~! ...Two pre-teen girls appeared on the scene.

This is it. This is what we wanted! A project like this! Ryuuji and Taiga lost control and couldn't express themselves in words. *Kyah kyah*, they squealed as they high-fived each other. They squealed even more; they were practically hugging each other.

With this, Ryuuji could ask Minori out naturally. *Wanna go with everyone else?*—that was all he had to do. They would go to the party together, and then depending on how the mood went and how things progressed... No, he would just enjoy being with Minori during Christmas Eve. That was enough for him. Taiga wouldn't have to mumble about whether things were fair or not, and just needed to go to the party to see Kitamura. It would be hard for them to be alone together, but they would at least spend the evening together, anyway.

Then, it wasn't just Ryuuji and Taiga who had turned into a bunch of screaming schoolgirls.

"We don't have plans on Christmas Eve anyway~!"

"It sounds like it might actually end up being fun?!"

"I hope they'll let us go in something other than our uniforms~!"

"I want to wear a cute dress or something!" They were shouting on and on. Several people around the class were already planning on attending. The students of class 2-C already liked events, and this one was headed up by the patron saint of broken hearts, the leader of class 2-C, so they couldn't help but be excited.

What a mood... Ryuuji let his relentless reptile eyes scan the place. It wasn't that he had been cursed by a snake that had been killed by his ancestors—he was just so exhilarated he couldn't stop his eyes. They could all look forward to the romantic Christmas Eve party...and then maybe, quite possibly, he might actually be able to confess to Minori for real. Then maybe—if that really did happen, what answer would Minori give him? He licked his lips, which had dried

out and split from his excitement. He stifled his enthusiasm as he sneakily tried to turn toward Minori.

“That’s right, why don’t you join the prep committee, Tiger?”

“Yeah, you just said you love Christmas, after all.”

“That’s perfect! You’ve got to do it now!”

Unexpected voices started joining in from around Taiga. Noto also smiled at Taiga and was saying, “Yeah, go join the committee!”

Amid those voices, Taiga’s face turned red, and she struggled to stand up.

“I-I-I-I-If everyone’s so insistent, I-I-I-I-I’d be okay with it. Fwa ha ha ha ha ha!”

She laughed in a high-pitched voice to hide her embarrassment. “Hmph!” Then she became arrogant.

“You’re joining too, you salt-slug dog!”

She pointed at Ryuuji, but her face still looked as though it would melt right onto the floor. She would be able to help prepare a Christmas party with Kitamura, and on top of that, it seemed natural because she was just responding to the nomination from her classmates. In that moment, every one of Taiga’s desires had been fulfilled in exactly the way she wanted them to be.

Taiga suddenly pointed at Minori as well.

“Minorin, you have to do it, too! Do it with us! Join us!”

Kyyaaaaaaaaah! She’d even kicked Ryuuji into the vortex of delight. What an amazing thing Taiga had done. She really was a producer that went by the name of the angel of love. She was a heavensent child of Christmas with a doughnut halo over her head. Ryuuji’s ogre-mask face rose, and he turned to Minori. *Let’s do it! Join us! We’ll do it together!*

“Sorry. I have to pass this time around.”

“What?! Why?!”

Ryuuji’s internal monologue was fully in sync with Taiga’s voice. Minori, who had been joking around just earlier as she had been retreating from them, now shook her head obstinately. Her lips were pursed.

“I’m not in the mood for a Christmas party or anything like that. I’m really not. It’s like it’s not the time for me to be happy...with what happened at that match I was talking about earlier. I really, really feel a weight on my shoulders from what happened. If I were just running around yelling and having fun in this situation, I feel like I’d seriously be setting a bad example for the rest of the club. There’s another game right after New Year’s, so I need to practice, too. So, I’m sorry. But you have fun, especially you Taiga, you have lots.”

But—basically, she wasn’t going to join the prep committee or go to the party? Ryuuji was speechless. He had been so excited in his selfishness that he couldn’t tolerate the sudden plummet. It was as though all the color in the world disappeared.

“Whoa!”

“Ehee hee. ♥ In that case, maybe I’ll join in Minori’s place~?!”

Bam! Half-running into him, the one heartily hitting Ryuuji in the back where he sat down was Ami.

“What a face you’re making,” she added in a small whisper. Taiga’s face crumpled momentarily.

“Geh, Dimhuahua?! No, don’t, don’t do it. We don’t need a hairy beast joining us! Beat it! You should go back into the woods where you belong, you hairball!”

“Oh, my~? Tiger-chan, should you really be saying that? Aren’t you being a good little girl until Christmas comes around~? Your buddy Santa is watching, you know~?”

“Ugh...”

Ami put her pointer finger up to her lip-glossy shiny lips and looked at them with upturned eyes. With that one finger, she made Taiga shut up. Then she let a sickeningly sweet smile open up over her face like a flower, and her large, radiant eyes looked down slowly at her classmates’ faces. In a moment, her unfair beauty took hold of the mood in the class and forcefully pulled in the eyes of everyone in the room.

“Aren’t you super excited for the party?! I’m definitely going! Yuusaku’s plan to have a Christmas party everyone at school can go to is way too amazing! I

seriously love plans like this~! We've got to use our power as a class to make it a night to get excited for! Right, everyone?!"

Yay! Someone shouted, and they naturally followed with applause.

"I'm definitely, definitely going!"

"I'll join the committee, too!"

"I can't believe I can spend Christmas Eve with Ami-chan!"

"This is the high point of my life!"

And on and on they went. There were guys getting choked up with tears. The girls pointed at them and laughed, and though they clamored, their eyes glittered with joy.

She really is good at this stuff, Ryuuji thought as he looked up at Ami in surprise. Ami had the whole class filled with passion again with another smile, and she even went so far as to hug Taiga and give her a peck on the cheek.

"Let's do it together~! ♥"

"Gweh!" Taiga pushed her away, but because of the "good girl" constraints that she had imposed on herself, she couldn't actually say no.

"Oh~? What's with that look? You don't want to work with me?"

Noticing Ryuuji's eyes, Ami raised one eyebrow slightly while still smiling. Her large eyes lit up. She took a glance around the others who started getting excited and then pulled away from them. In a low, spiteful voice she whispered:

"I see. You'd rather be with a certain someone more than me."

Ryuuji, of course, was irritated. In a similarly whispered voice, he chanted ardently and insistently into her ear, "You idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot!"

He was self-conscious of his poor vocabulary, but this was all Ryuuji could muster in his counterattack against Ami. Ami held her ears and tried to run, "Uwaah!" That was an unexpected reaction. It seemed that he had tickled her ears. *I won*, Ryuuji thought as he laughed at her.

"Heh," he said, "see what you get."

"That was low!"

Ami glared at him with harsh, provoking eyes, but he knew she would. *Yaah yaah*. He danced a little and made fun of her all the more.

“Hmph, just because Tiger’s acting weird and docile, you’re getting full of yourself! I’ll tell you this, Takasu-kun, but you’d be better off being nice to me.”

“Why’s that?”

“Oh~? You don’t know? To be blunt, plans like this play into the palm of my hand. I can pull everyone up or bring them all down. I wonder what you’d think if it were up to me whether a certain melancholy someone is encouraged to come...”

Ryuuji’s forehead wrinkled. A smile formed on Ami’s lips. What did that smile mean? And what was Ami’s aim?

The only thing he knew was that what Ami was saying was true. When it came to events, parties, and plans that involved getting everyone excited...all of those things were Ami’s domain. But, of course, he couldn’t have thought that Kawashima Ami, the darkest-hearted person in the whole country, would lend him her strength and help him with realizing his unrequited love. She whispered to him in a soft, sweet voice.

“Takasu-kun, you want the party to be a success, right? I’d like it to be a success. I’m not Tiger, but I really do love Christmas. I don’t have a boyfriend to spend it with, unfortunately. Plus, even if I went home, my parents would be busy. I think I’d like to get everyone excited and have a fun party at school...I really mean it.”

Ami grinned and then laughed. She pushed up her hair, and her eyes, which had an unfathomable depth, lit up and glistened.

“So. Because. Of. That. Let’s work together, okay? Don’t you feel like putting your heart into it?”

Ryuuji raised his face. Then, with a force that almost made Ami recoil, he nodded, “Yeah!” The answer was naturally *Yes. Yes, yes, yes*. He did want to put his heart into it.

He couldn’t stall out in a place like this. He didn’t have time to get lost in Ami’s depths, either. For now, he could only act. The battle for Christmas with

Minori had already started.

“Right! Let’s do our best! Let’s do it, Kawashima!”

“Aha. ♥ You’re finally into it. ♥”

Ryuuji and Ami’s breathing was in sync as they high-fived in the middle of the excited shouts of joy.

“Hey, don’t get all buddy-buddy with Ami-chan!”

“We’re done for. We’ve got to deal with Takasu quick.”

He felt resentful looks coming from all around him, but right now he just needed to ignore all the eyes. There was just one thing he knew. Somehow, somehow, he wanted Minori to be excited, too. In the blazing, fiery battle for the person he loved, for the one special day in the whole year, he wished for a fire to be lit in Minori’s heart.

But Minori’s eyes were quiet and cold in that moment. She just looked up, expressionless, at the center of their classmates’ shouts of joy where Ami was. She just stood there. When Ami saw her, Ami smiled even more charmingly. She whispered strangely slowly to Minori.

“Huh~? What’s wrong, Minori-chan? Have you decided that you want to join in? If that’s the case, I’d be happy to welcome you anytime.”

“I already said it’s not possible.”

That was all Minori said. She abruptly averted her eyes. Ryuuji saw Minori’s profile in that moment. He thought it was odd, but he didn’t question her. He simply continued to watch her.

As Minori averted her eyes, Ami silently watched Minori’s face for a while, too. It was as though she were waiting for Minori to say something.

On that day, dozens of girls and boys from all different classes volunteered for the prep committee, which was more than enough. They weren’t just made up of students who liked festivals, either. There were even people in other classes who had been told about Kawashima Ami saying that she would participate. That might have accounted for the explosive increase in volunteers.

“What~?” said Yasuko. “Ryuu-chan, you’re studying for the end of semester exams~? And Taiga-chan is, too~?”

“That’s right. At the family restaurant we normally go to. There’s a salmon patty in the fry pan, so warm it up a little and eat that. Be careful not to burn the red beans. There’s daikon-and-tofu miso soup in the pot. And then in the fridge, there’s some mustard greens, so make sure you actually put them on a plate before you eat them.”

“Ahh, that sounds like a yummy menu~! But if you already made it, you could eat before leaving.”

“We’ve already promised to eat with everyone else.”

“Then I’m all alone...”

From behind him, his mother made a lonely noise. He thrust his arm into the down jacket as though he were shaking off his guilt. He had told Yasuko a lie. In actuality, everyone else was going to meet after already having eaten dinner. He didn’t need to go to the family restaurant to eat. Ryuuji, though, had a reason for wanting to get an early start no matter what he had to do. Even if it cost him extra on their food budget. Even if he had to lie to his mother, who made that money.

He stuck his studying supplies into a canvas tote bag and made sure not to forget to stuff the patriarch’s sheaves of notes into it. Then he checked the inside of his wallet. He put his phone and his keys into the back pocket of his jeans. He put on his scarf, which had made it through the day without being stolen by Taiga, and wondered whether he needed a beanie.

“Chi. I’m so lonely, be-yotch.”

He dropped everything. He turned around.

In their freezing, two-bedroom apartment (they had a heater, but didn’t turn it on because they had a heated kotatsu table), the silence fell thick upon them. *What was that just now?*

The mother smiled at her son. “Ehee ☆.” She lay down under the kotatsu

with the blanket covering her all the way to her shoulders. She was practically melting into the floor.

“Ryuu-chan, you don’t know? It’s what the cool kids say these days~! A new girl taught it to me, she told me it’s how all the kids are talking these days~! It’s cray cute! It’s so fleek, yo~! Ehee hee! ☆ And then, I’m keeping up with the kids, so I’m super-duper amazing—so fleek!”

“Please, no! Stop! You’re completely off!”

Ryuuji felt like holding his ears closed as he hysterically yelled. The wound this inflicted on his heart ran deep. First, Yasuko was completely wrong in all sorts of ways. How stupid was she? Next, for her to merrily report to her son that “this is what the kids are saying these days” just revealed how old she was. He had thought of her as young and even immature, but she really was old, through and through. The heaviness of this truth that had been laid on him! “As I held her and felt how light she was *I was shocked* At my mother’s age.” He remembered the famous tanka poem from one of his textbooks. It turned in his brain.

Without noticing the wound she’d given her son, Yasuko pouted as she lay on a floor cushion under the kotatsu table.

“What~? I can’t be off fleek. This is all so turnt. I can’t be wrong, yo.”

Without makeup on and in Uniqlo lounge clothes, she breathed out through her nose, “Hmph.” Unfortunately, all her actions did was show that her brains were like corrupted files. In times like this, even Ryuuji thanked God that he had mostly inherited his father’s genes. He was really glad he hadn’t inherited Yasuko’s slippery-smooth brain. Ryuuji had never met him and didn’t know whether he was even alive or not, and had no way of imagining what his head was like, but it was at least a small thing to know that his brain must have had a few deeper folds and denser nerve bundles than Yasuko’s. Even imagining the type of chaos their household would have been in if both of them had “smooth, on fleek, cray brains ☆” was scary enough.

“Inko-chan, I’m leaving Yasuko to you. The only one I can trust with anything now is you, Inko-chan,” he told his parrot, who was standing in the birdcage with her wings closed. When he did that, Inko-chan’s haggard eyes twitched

beneath their lids. Froth dribbled and drooled from the edge of her rotten-meat-colored beak. *Schlurp...* Inko-chan snuffled the foam back into her mouth with her long tongue. Several long strands of that cloudy stuff traversed the top and bottom of her beak.

“Impossible.”

She just said that one word. Then she showed him the whites of her eyes and stomped her feet, which were like shaking, torn twigs. She turned her back to her owner and, with perfect timing, she defecated.

“Whoa! What rebellion!”

“Inko-chan is lonely, so she Zs all day, right, Inko-chan? ☆ Gyah! ☆”

Inko-chan had torn off a piece of the tip of Yasuko’s finger, which Yasuko had stuck in a crack of the cage. “Peh!” Next Inko-chan spat it out. This was a terrible act of rebellion. Without thinking, Ryuuji’s stern voice rose like the hollow needle of Étretat.

“What’s gotten into you, Inko-chan?! Where’s my normal, obedient, cute Inko-chan?!”

“Hah. ☆ I got it~! Ryuu-chaaan, it’s because of that~!”

Yasuko pointed to a cooking book Ryuuji had checked out from the library that was sitting face up. It said “Exceptional Christmas Hospitality” on the cover, and accompanying the title was a giant, whole roasted bird. Right next to it in big letters were the words, “Roast a magnificent, whole bird!” In a fluster, Ryuuji jumped at the book and thrust it under the sitting cushion to hide it.

“I’m sorry, Inko-chan. I was insensitive. I won’t roast a bird in this home. Never.”

He sat properly in front of the birdcage and lowered his head. In the same custom as her son, Yasuko also lowered her head, “Sowry. ☆” Inko-chan’s clouded eyes turned to the mother and son who owned her.

“...Really?”

“Really.”

“Never ever?!”

“Never ever.”

Inko-chan’s shaking beak and bulging eyes gleamed as they reflected the sharp eyes of her owners, which were emitting the prospect of imminent danger. Her bald head was covered in goosebumps and open pores. Just when it seemed like the rift between pet and owners was about to be fixed...

“Ugh... This is not okay! Whatever this is, is like, super not okay!”

At some point, Taiga had come into the living room, and at the scene of the mother and son prostrating themselves to the birdcage, voiced her disapproval. They had agreed to meet in front of the condo, but since Ryuuji hadn’t come down, she probably decided to go up to him. She seemed like she had a lot more that she wanted to say, but since she was in the middle of being a “good girl,” this was as far as she could go.



“Ohh, Taiga-chan! So you’re going out to study~? Make sure your studying is on fleek. ☆”

“Ya-Ya-chan?! You...y-y-you—”

Yasuko pouted and started to slowly wiggle her arms around. *Are you part of the Sankai Juku dance troupe or something?* Ryuuji thought. No, no, she definitely had to be doing the wave.

“I’m on fi-yah~?” she was happily muttering, but she was dancing like water.

“You’ve got to be kidding me...”

Holding her forehead with her hand, Taiga closed her eyes as though enduring a bout of vertigo.

The sun set, and the air of the midwinter night cooled to freezing. The one and only saving grace was that there was no wind. The people walking the streets had their coat collars up and passed by each other quickly with scowls on their faces.

“It’s cold!”

“Yeah!”

Ryuuji and Taiga couldn’t even have a decent conversation. They walked for about ten minutes on the asphalt streets and under the light of the streetlamps as though they were racing.

“Uwah~! It was so cold~!”

“Hah~! It’s so warm~! Actually, it’s hot. The heater is too strong in here.”

Practically flying in, they pushed open the glass door, which shone brilliantly with light.

They were at their regular family restaurant by the national highway. Ryuuji felt like he was about to choke on the heat when he took a step into the building. He groaned as he pulled off his beanie. Taiga also pulled off her colorful mohair cap. Her pale, long hair fluttered up and dropped down onto the back of her coat. Together, they could finally breathe in the warm air.

They told the waitress who came out to lead them in that they were meeting with friends and secured four window seats. They looked around the floor, and Ryuuji, trying not to be a nuisance asked, “Um, excuse me, is Kushieda-san, the part-timer, working a shift today? Umm...we’re her friends from school.”

“Kushieda is off today,” The waitress easily replied. “Once you’ve decided on your orders, please press the button to call me.”

Ryuuji was paralyzed. *Off today?* He thought. *She couldn’t be.* Taiga also wrinkled her forehead, “Huh?”

“No way, that’s weird. I thought she would definitely be here... She’s usually here Monday nights. Is she just taking today off?”

“I knew it, I should have double-checked... Ahh, damn it, I messed up.”

Taiga had invited Minori to study with everyone that day, but she had turned Taiga down saying, “After I have club, I have work.” She also said she would borrow the notes when she needed them and told Ryuuji to do what he wanted with them until then. Since those were the circumstances, Ryuuji went out of his way to make a paltry attempt to come to the restaurant early in order to talk to her, since she should have been working. Instead, his attempt was entirely in vain.

“Something seems wrong. Let’s ask where she’s working right now.”

Taiga twisted around and immediately pulled out her cell phone, but Ryuuji reached across the table and stopped her.

“It’s fine. We don’t need to do that. We’d be bothering her if we call when she’s working, and she can’t answer if you message her, anyway. We can’t do anything about it today, and it’s my fault for not checking in with her. This might be a divine message that we should stop slacking off and get serious about studying. Look, let’s eat already and just give up and start studying. Here’s the menu.”

“Ngh...”

Taiga took off her coat and opened the menu he handed to her, but she was thinking about something absentmindedly. When he flicked the corner of the menu at her fingers, her eyes finally started going over the text.

“I’ve decided. I’ll have the winter vegetable beef curry. What about you?”

“I’ll have the kabocha squash doria.”

They called the waitress with the button and put in their orders. Then the two of them went to get their drinks. Afterwards, they went ahead and opened up their textbooks, thinking they might as well start while they waited on their food.

“Hey Ryuuji, I was thinking.”

Taiga said that strangely, like her mouth was full of rocks. *What?* He looked up as he sipped his coffee.

“Don’t you think that Minori is avoiding you?”

Clunk. His cup missed the saucer and clattered noisily. He also got some of the hot contents on his hands and pulled his elbow back hard into the wall in surprise. He was paralyzed with so much pain he couldn’t speak. Ryuuji turned his face down in spite of himself.

“Ahh... I definitely shouldn’t have said anything...”

“No! I want to hear what you have to say! Wh-why?!”

Taiga turned her eyes up and to the side as though exasperated. She spoke in a low voice as she fidgeted with and twirled her long hair.

“Today, I saw you and Minori together for the first time in a while. Before I was suspended, we would all talk regularly, but today you didn’t even have a conversation.”

“We did talk, though. We chatted, we really did—more than once.”

“All of that was as good as not talking. Actually, you never even got to the point where you could have a regular conversation. Minorin wouldn’t even come over to you at all when I called her over. She was just playing around the whole time and wouldn’t actually talk to you. She wouldn’t even come when we invited her to study. She was supposed to be working, but she’s not here. ...I wonder if she lied about work.”

“Lied? You’re reading too far into things.”

Minori would never lie. She wasn't the type of person to lie. Ryuuji, at least, believed that, but Taiga didn't seem to hold the same conviction.

"But you can't know. Minori isn't just 'an airheaded cute girl.' The Minorin you see is a fantasy version of her, but even you know that she's not just a pure, bright, funny girl like she looks like. Sometimes that's the good part about Minorin..."

"That's..."

That was true. After Taiga had said it, Ryuuji couldn't help but nod. He wouldn't go as far as to agree that he fantasized about Minori, but for example, during their summer trip and at other points, Minori had pulled one over their heads for sure.

"Yeah, I guess she is."

"And on top of that, she said she wouldn't join the prep committee for the Christmas Eve party. She said she wasn't planning on going. If she were acting normal, that'd be unbelievable for Minorin."

"Well...Kushieda said that it was because she was down from that match she had, right? I don't believe that was a lie. That's right—Kushieda must be acting weird because she's feeling down from the game."

That was it—she wasn't actually avoiding him. In order to keep Taiga from saying anything more, which she seemed like she was about to, Ryuuji raised his voice a bit.

"The issue is how we're going to get her excited and get her to go. This is the time for angel Taiga-sama to come out and show her stuff, isn't it? You said you'd go naked, didn't you?"

"Huh? Naked? I didn't say anything like that. What are you playing at with that?"

Even though she didn't abuse him with her words, the look she showered him with was more than cold enough, and Ryuuji paused in spite of himself. At that point, she sighed loudly and purposefully. Taiga probably wanted to click her tongue at him, but she endured and sipped her cocoa.

“Well, of course, I know that. Angel Taiga is love’s envoy. Christmas’s heavensent child. The very image of a good girl. Santa is watching. He’s checking his list. So, I’ll do what it takes to get Minorin to the party on Christmas Eve. I’m planning on supporting you for real, like Cupid, so that your confession to her goes well.”

In order to show him just how “for real” she was, she closed one eye and mimed an arrow and bow, took aim, and pretended to hit Ryuuji’s heart. He felt like there wasn’t really much point to aiming at *his* heart, but really the problem wasn’t with that.

“C-c-c-con-confess? I don’t even know if I can do that...”

“You have to do it. It’s Christmas Eve. It’s the night before sacred Christmas, after all.”

She easily slipped in an assertion, but on her second sigh, good girl Taiga’s face clouded.

“But something’s definitely off. That’s what I think. I don’t know how to support you anymore. You and Minorin are different from before. Before, you were more—”

Sorry for keeping you waiting. At the sound of the server’s voice, Taiga cut off. The server set their meals in front of them and slipped the bill into its holder. They were silent for a while. The server left, and Ryuuji handed a spoon to Taiga.

“So? What were you saying about us?”

“Ahh, it’s fine. I don’t even know what I think about it. There’s no way you would know either. Our food will get cold, so anyway, let’s eat. I’m digging in. ... Hot hot hot! Ahh!”

Taiga immediately burned herself on the first bite and got white sauce dribbles on several pages of her still-open textbook.

“Ahhh! Seriously, I thought you’d do that! You’re a klutz, after all. Wipe it, here, make sure you get all of it!”

“I did, this is fine. Ahh, I got an oil stain on it... Ah well. This will make it easier

to tell what parts are on the test. I just need to look for the stains.”

What are you saying? he thought exasperatedly as he took the textbook from her and tried to wipe away a little more at the food Taiga had spilled and given up on.

“There they are! Takasu and Tiger, sorry for making you wait! Everyone’s here.”

“Sorry for the wait~! Oh, that looks good, you’re eating something! It looks really yummy, maybe I should get something, too.”

They raised their faces at Noto and Haruta’s voices. “Yo.” Ryuuji was slightly surprised to find two others behind them. It seemed Taiga was also slightly shaken and had frozen up with her spoon still in her mouth.

“Yo! Today sure is cold! I think I might switch to a down coat soon.”

“That’s right, Maruo, I told you before that down is the warmest. You can get them pretty cheap, too. Oh, look, Takasu-kun is wearing down, too.”

Next to Kitamura, who was wearing a gray duffle coat like a typical test-taker, Maya stuck close by him in a short down coat. Even though it was the middle of the winter, she had the guts to bare her knees in a miniskirt. She was also wearing tall boots and had a fluffy bag. They could all tell a group of guys still in their school uniforms who were sitting nearby were watching her. Her long and straight silky hair was slightly dark and freshly dyed. Her light makeup, which consisted of just mascara and lip gloss, suited her.

The looks she got were different from when Ami appeared. *“It’s a celebrity... uwah!”* It was different from the look whenever Taiga came on the scene, too. *“That’s a beautiful girl...whoa!”* She was rawer and closer to home. If something were to happen, she might even get hit on. The stir around them even forced its way to Ryuuji’s ears. It wasn’t as though he didn’t feel a slight sense of superiority over the guys watching them just because he had been waiting for her.

“Kihara. What are you doing here? This is rare.”

“I want to copy the patriarch’s notes, too. And I can’t get into the mood to study on my own. Is it okay if I join you?”

“Well, of course... Where are Kawashima and Kashii today?”

“Oh, it looks like they can’t come. Right, is it okay if I give Ami-chan and Nanako copies, too?”

“I don’t really mind, but...” He would understand Ami coming, but he couldn’t have imagined Maya coming solo without the troupe.

“Okay, let’s hurry and sit,” Maya said as she grabbed Kitamura’s coat sleeve. There were wrinkles on Taiga’s forehead, and the spoon was still in her mouth. It seemed like she might not have known what to do since she wasn’t dealing with Ami, or she might have had her hands tied because of her good girl limitations. Taiga remained speechless as she looked up at Kitamura and Maya, who was clinging to him.

“All right, let’s all sit down! Of course, this is too cramped for six people.”

Noto was strangely brisk. “We’ll take this, too.” He put his own bag in a two-seater partitioned by the walkway to claim it. Then...

“Okay, okay, Tiger, could you stand for a bit?! Haruta, get in the back there! Kihara, sit next to Takasu, after you, after you. Now, I’ll take the seat next to Haruta. Tiger, over here, over here, bring your doria. This seat. Here, Kitamura, take that seat please. You can take my stuff off, thanks. Okay, now we’re good.”

Before they realized it, Kitamura and Taiga were conveniently facing each other at the two-seater table. The other four were slightly separated from them.

“H-huh? W-wait a second?! I want to sit over there, too! No, that, uh, oh I know, I’ll sit with Tiger so the girls are together! Right, right Tiger? Let’s do that!”

Maya was strangely flustered as she staggered to stand up, but Taiga wasn’t even given the time to answer. Haruta heartily picked at his nose. “Shaddup.” He stuck his finger right up to Maya.

“Uwah, gross!”

“Don’t throw a fit. Do you really hate sitting next to Taka-chan that much? I feel so bad for Taka-chan. That’s cold, Kihara. It’s brutal, isn’t it, Taka-chan?”

This time he turned his dirty finger at Ryuuji. Maya had a somewhat desperate expression on her face as she shook her head.

“What?! No, no, that’s not what this is! That’s not it, but—”

“Then let’s order! We just need to add four fountain drinks, right?!”

With strange and very efficient methods, Noto shut Maya down. He quickly pressed the button and called the waitress to finish placing the order. Maya had lost her chance to speak, but she glared at Noto’s face as though wanting to say something. Noto ignored her. “Oh, I’ve got fingerprints on these,” he said, taking off his glasses and diligently rubbing his lenses with a napkin.

What’s with this mood—Ryuuji swallowed.

“Okay, now is drink time before we start! We’d be in the way if we all went at once, so I’ll go up and get everyone’s drinks. Do you have requests? If you don’t, I’m getting you all cokes!”

The one who had stood up, not caring about anything else and going at his own pace was Kitamura. With the air of “cokes-for-everyone” kind of guys, Noto, Haruta, and Ryuuji sent him off with automatic applause and shouts of, “Yeah!”

“Ah, uh, ah, I want something w-w-warm...no, actually! I’ll go, too!”

Taiga stood from her seat and went after Kitamura with her face still flushed red. Noto and Haruta high-fived. “Yo!” Ryuuji was wide-eyed. Maya seemed sullen. Kitamura and Taiga handed each other cups in front of the fountain drink machine, filled them with ice, called over the waitress when they couldn’t find more cups, dropped the ice (Taiga), and picked it up (Kitamura), dropped the tongs (Taiga), picked them up (Kitamura), and to the unknowing eye, seemed like great partners.

Noto and Haruta appeared smug as they grinned and stared at the two.

“So...” said Ryuuji. “What’s your deal?”

“Huh? What? What could you possibly be talking about?”

“Don’t act dumb!”

Ryuuji’s evil eyes locked with Noto’s small otter eyes through his glasses. No

matter how thick he was, this was obvious.

“Why are you being weird and trying to put Kitamura and Taiga together like that?”

Right. Noto had been acting weird ever since that morning. He had been spurring Taiga and Kitamura on all day in an obvious way that was hard to call casual. It wasn't as though the likes of an otter could stand up to Ryuuji's sharp eyes, which blazed and flared with black flames that belonged to the darkness. Noto easily surrendered and stuck out his tongue. If anyone was wondering, he didn't look cute in the slightest when he did.

“You figured it out. Well, that's fine. We wanted you to help out, too, anyway. I think that Kitamura and Tiger would make a great couple.”

“Oh, I think so, too!”

Right! Grossly putting their hands together, Noto and Haruta nodded together. Ryuuji stopped moving.

“Look, Kitamura got rejected by the patriarch, so he's hurting right now. He's trying his best as president, but he's definitely hurting. We want him to hurry up and get better. Don't you think the wonder drug to cure him is new love? And this is just between us...”

Noto turned stealthily to the fountain drinks. Taiga and Kitamura didn't seem like they were coming back anytime soon. Once he confirmed that, he lowered his voice.

“Tiger seems like she likes Kitamura. This is for real—like really for real. I know you probably never realized, being you, Takasu.”

It wasn't on purpose, Ryuuji realized, when he looked back at Noto, that idiot with his half-open mouth and idiotic face. Noto assumed Ryuuji had agreed and nodded to himself.

“Ahh, you must really be surprised. I didn't expect it either. Who knew that Tiger thinks like a girl, too. And you're the one who's been closest to Tiger and looking after her, so it's natural to be in shock.”

“...”

He was still speechless. He couldn't get out a word at all. Not a single word.

The words that caught in his throat weren't *How did you find out*, or *I already knew that*, or anything like that. They were words he didn't expect like:

What do you guys know?

Don't stick your nose into this when you don't know anything.

Leave it alone.

Or something like that.

That feeling rose up quietly in him like pale anger. It robbed Ryuuji's expression from his face. It was like he wanted to monopolize the situation, like he felt a sense of superiority over them. The emotions invaded him in ways that he couldn't quite pinpoint.

Then he thought, *It's not like that. No, no.*

He finally realized how strange his thoughts were. It *was* like that, and he couldn't refute it. Taiga liked Kitamura. That was definitely true. The biggest problem that Ryuuji and Taiga had faced for a while now was precisely that—it was Kitamura. Weren't they completely right?

But, why was it that right now, when an objective truth had been brought to the light and said aloud, he was trying to deny and even reject it?

He didn't understand. He didn't understand anything anymore.

"Here, sorry for the wait! Four cokes!"

Ryuuji snapped his face up from the tray that came down in front of him. Kitamura, who was garbed in Uniqlo-casual clothes from top to bottom like he normally was, handed out the drinks on the tray to the four of them.

"First, how about we all try our hand at math? If anyone doesn't understand anything, everyone can look over the president's notes and think it over."

"Sure, but there's no way that the greatest teacher ever wouldn't have understood something? It's not like I don't get anything, though..."

At Haruta's voice, Kitamura smiled and shook his head.

"There's a lot of things, actually. Then we'll do that later."

He turned around and headed back to his table with Taiga. Even seeing Taiga from the margins, she looked nervous. She dropped her spoon as she was trying to clean up her things and dropped her pencil case trying to pick it up. Then, while trying to pick her pencil case up, she dropped her textbook, and in the end, she also dropped her notebook. As she did that, her face became a shade pinker each time. *Are you okay?* Kitamura seemed to ask as he helped her gather her things. She returned a stiff smile that said, *I'm okay*. Kitamura, who was looking back at her, kindly smiled back. There was no time for Ryuuji to help as their four hands skillfully picked up the fallen items.

"See," said Noto. "They do look pretty great together. Well, I'm going to the restroom really quick before we start studying."

"Oh, I'll go, too."

Noto and Haruta stood from their seats, but Ryuuji still couldn't move. It was a very strange feeling. Noto had looked at him as though he had been clueless and now, suddenly, Taiga and Kitamura who were sitting slightly away from them almost started to seem like strangers. *I see*, he thought. *I see, if I think of them as strangers, Taiga and Kitamura really do look much, much better together than I thought. For real.*

"T-Takasu-kun! Hey, hey, hey, hey! Hey!"

"Uh, right..."

From beside him, Maya dug her elbow into him. He blinked. Low enough that only Ryuuji could hear, she scowled as she impatiently whispered, "Takasu-kun, what do you think about that?! You don't agree with them, do you?! You don't think they'd work out well, right? You don't think that they should date, right?!"

"Uh...well...that's...actually, I think it's really...sudden..."

"I knew it!" Maya nodded as though she were aiming to attack while he mumbled.

"Right, you don't think so, either! It's been going around the whole class, but that can't be right!"

"Wait a sec, what's been going around the whole class..."

“There’d be nothing good about it for you if Maruo and Tiger got together, right?! Everyone says you hang around Tiger because you’re just super nice and like taking care of people. They say there’s nothing more to it, but, really, you must like Tiger, right?!”

“Huh?! Uh, uh wai...huh?!”

“I’m rooting for you, Takasu-kun! I really am! So you can’t give up!”

She fist-pumped enthusiastically and snuck a glance at the table where Taiga and Kitamura sat. No matter what he denied, or how he did it, he probably wouldn’t be able to get through to her. He knew that Kitamura had been popular among the girls for a while, so he wasn’t surprised at the passionate look Maya turned to him. It was the other part that surprised him. *Wait a second*, he wanted to say.

What in the world had happened while he hadn’t been looking? Who had figured it out, how much did they know, and what were they trying to do? What was he supposed to do? For a while his mind was just a mess. He was a mad cray mess and fleek-wood mac. A-B-C-yotch. The words were just gibberish. He didn’t get what it all meant.

Taiga and Kitamura had the doria plate taken away and were amicably opening the math book, but they weren’t looking at it. They were saying something to each other. He could hear fragments about Christmas Eve and the party, the prep committee, the student council...things like that. Noto and Haruta returned and started opening their textbooks at that table, too.

“We should just copy the patriarch’s notes at a convenience store on the way home.”

“Actually, what if we change the order of things and copy them now?”

“The restaurant won’t like that, obviously.”

He pretended to join in on the conversation by nodding and shaking his head, but Ryuuji’s stomach wouldn’t settle. He couldn’t calm down. His eyes wandered, prowled about, and since he didn’t know where to look, he was forced to make them go from right to left. When he looked straight ahead, he thought, *Oh no, the curry’s completely cold*. With everything going on, he had

forgotten to eat it. Right, he needed to hurry and clean it off his plate first.

He grasped the spoon loaded with rice and curry and stuffed it in his mouth.

“A stool test! Ryuuji, a stool test! They say the whole prep committee has to do a stool test!”

Bleh! He almost spat out all the curry. Right before he did, he desperately puckered his lips and swallowed the brown stuff down his throat.

“Y-you...did that on purpose, didn’t you?!”

“Huh? What?”

Behind Taiga, who was tilting her head in curiosity, Kitamura nodded gravely.

“We really do have to do stool tests. We have to work with food, so everyone has to do one.”

“Heey~! Why, you! You’ve got to have some delicacy! We’ve got someone over here eating poo, so don’t talk about curry! Oh, I mean the opposite! We’ve got someone over here eating curry, so don’t talk about poo! Look, Taka-chan is eating po...I mean curry!”

Kind, sweet Haruta hit him when he was already down. To Ryuuji’s sensitive eyes, the curry now looked like something entirely else. He super cray didn’t want to eat it.

Chapter 3

Time flew like an arrow. The steadily marching days didn't give Ryuuji any time to spare as they easily sent him into chaos.

"Wah!"

"Kyah!"

Alongside the muffled screams, glittery pieces of something fluttered and scattered. *Ahh!* Others also added their own yells as the empty cardboard box futilely fell into a corner of the hallway.

"No! What do we do? This is the worst! They're all over the place!"

"Seriously, you klutz! If you're going to make a scene, at least go pick them up while you're doing it! Let me see. Are your knees okay? Ahh, you scraped them up, too! Seriously, you really are a klutz!"

"You don't have to tell me! Ugh...I really did it this time..."

Taiga had scattered a large quantity of silver and gold confetti that five people had painstakingly cut from tape around the school hallway. If they wanted to, they could have bought the confetti, but once they had found out it was more expensive than expected, the prep committee had decided to make it by hand in order to save on their budget. They had worked hours in silence before school, during lunch, and after school just to make it. Finally, when they had finished making several boxes worth, which was enough for the party, a certain klutz had fallen over, done a few flips, and scattered a whole box's worth.

The klutzy culprit stood up and scowled provokingly. She looked at her own knees, which seemed painfully red.

"Hey! Someone please pick this up, too!"

"Oh, sorry..."

Ryuuji turned around in a fluster towards the voice of the single teacher (age 30), whom Taiga had collided with from behind. When he looked, he saw that

the bachelorette (who was in excellent health) had lost a vast quantity of the printouts she was holding. Luckily, she hadn't fallen over, which was to be expected from a bottom-heavy thirty-year-old... Though if he said that, it would probably cause a single door to a single alternate universe to open. He didn't say anything uncalled for but quickly kneeled in the hallway to pick up the printouts, leaving the confetti to the others.

"This is terrible~! They used to be in number order, and now they're all messed up~!"

"We're really sorry. She's the one who did this. It's that little idiot!"

Having been introduced, Taiga picked up the edge of her skirt, bent her knees, and looked unexpectedly honest as she lowered her expressionless head.

"Thanks for pointing that out!"

That was probably part of her good girl act. Had she been her normal self, at this point, the bachelorette (whose parents were alive and well) would have been sent to hell to dance forever in slow step by herself with a sixteen-beat tongue click.

Unaware of her good fortune, the bachelorette (an only child) furrowed her brow and said, "It seems like you're all just working on stuff for the prep committee lately. Are you all okay? It's nice that you're having a Christmas party, but don't forget about your tests. Especially you, Aisaka-san. Are you following along okay even after all the classes you missed while you were on suspension?"

Ahh, uhh. Taiga, who was absorbed in picking up the confetti, just made noises in response, so Ryuuji replied for her.

"We've been gathering at night and having study groups lately. We ask questions about the parts we don't know so the people who are teaching and the ones who are taught both get to learn. It looks like Taiga gets most of it in the first place, but what's really cinching everything is pretty much Kanou-senpai's notes."

"Really? Well, Aisaka-san had good grades to begin with, if only that, and you have good grades, too, Takasu-kun, but I'm worried about Haruta-kun and

Haruta-kun, and especially Haruta-kun...”

“You’re worried about Haruta-kun?”

“And also Haruta-kun. Oh. Haruta-kun isn’t doing work for the prep committee, too, is he?”

“It’s okay, Kitamura has a strict no-touch policy for him when it comes to the party, so he can devote himself to studying.”

In a gray knit top, tight white skirt, and with a small diamond pendant hanging to her chest, she created an impregnable defense as she crouched. (She had her knees on the ground and her thighs to the side to make sure that she didn’t show a glimpse of her underwear. It was the strongest measure against any peeking. It’s elegant and once learned, doesn’t leave a gap in the defenses and creates an unwelcoming aura!) The bachelorette (a government employee) gathered the printouts but still looked into Ryuuji’s face as though she were concerned.

“Please, please be absolutely—absolutely—sure you and everyone else don’t neglect your studies. I don’t want to see a sudden drop in your grades. You and Aisaka-san seem to always be here for the prep committee, and as your teacher, that has me worried.”

“I’m sorry...”

Ryuuji gave her a small apology and scratched at his head.

The bachelorette (a four-year college graduate) wasn’t necessarily completely wrong to be worried. The committee consumed Ryuuji and Taiga’s days with a torrent of work.

They would meet early in the morning with the student council and then be busy with various things related to the party preparations. There was plenty to do. They assigned people things, put together the things they needed for the program, allocated the budget, begged the instructors for the student council budget and expenses, had meetings during lunch, and, like they were now, would plan the agenda up to Christmas Eve, then divide themselves up as a group and choose what they needed to do. They would check in on each other’s progress and make confetti and decorations after school. They chiefly got

everyone together to work on physical labor.

In addition to that, they had their normal classes, of course, and their end-of-semester exams were coming. At night they would gather at the family restaurant or someone's house and form a study group, and when they broke up, they would go home to study individually. The teachers were persistent about telling them that the Christmas Eve party was something the school allowed on the condition of their oversight. If the students concentrated too intently on the party preparations and were negligent about their classes, or if their grades dropped during the exams, the teachers would immediately put a stop to everything.

In particular, there was not a single adult who looked kindly upon Taiga volunteering for the prep committee. She was already the number one problem child at school. On top of that, Taiga had recently earned a criminal record, so they couldn't give a warm reception to her participating in an unconventional student function put on for fun. It seemed quite a few teachers held the harsh opinion that she didn't seem like she'd reflected on her actions and that her punishment had been too lenient.

It was just one bachelorette—no, one homeroom teacher, Koigakubo Yuri, who had vouched for Taiga, citing that Taiga's grades hadn't been bad leading up to that point, and that she needed the committee as a way of letting off steam. Their teacher claimed Taiga would become more self-aware of her role as a student by taking on responsibilities. In other words, the bachelorette (though she was an only daughter, she wasn't insistent about using her family name, Koigakubo) was responsible for Taiga, and if Taiga fell from grace, the bachelorette (in other words, she wouldn't force her future husband to adopt her name!) would also be in a rocky position.

"But I think that you really don't need to worry about Taiga for now. Taiga's grades are even better than mine, and we're studying together for the upcoming exams. I saw her midterm test scores and finally got it. Saying that it was abnormal is kind of mean, but..."

"I forgot to write my name a couple of times when I was a first year and had a lot of 0 percent scores that I had to take supplementary exams for. Starting this year though, I've been telling myself before tests, 'Your name! Your name!'

Your! Name!' So it'll be okay."

"Sorry she causes these things by being klutzy... Here, this is everything."

"Danke schön!"

"Sorry for that. So, bachel...I mean, teacher, are you coming to the Christmas party?"

"Like I would! I don't have any plans, but I'm not putting my pride on the line to go! But—"

Oh ho ho. After she stopped, she suddenly shook with soft laughter.

"I hope everything's a success. You're working so hard. You deserve to be rewarded."

At the words of the bachelorette (who can become a bride anytime she wants!), the tip of Ryuuji's nose turned red without him realizing. He gained the ability to blow flames from his nose...not really. *To be rewarded*—in other words, that meant Minori coming to the party. It meant that he would be able to spend Christmas Eve with his unrequited love. For that to happen, Ryuuji and the angel Taiga-sama were investing their precious time to prepare for the party.

He wanted to be rewarded. Ryuuji was silent for a while as he digested those words. He wanted to spend the one and only Christmas Eve of his seventeenth year—the day for couples—with Minori. Taiga must have felt the same. She must have been praying for the party to go well with Kitamura.

The bachelorette (oh, she's good at foreign languages, too ♥) wouldn't know that, but the gentle look she gave Taiga seemed like it had sincere warmth. As their homeroom teacher, she had genuinely been worried about Taiga, the problem child, and Ryuuji fully understood that just from her look. He understood that this adult really was on their side.

Taiga crawled along the hallway.

"Aisaka-senpai! You're getting trash mixed in, too~!"

"Geh! Awah wah, oh no, oh no!"

"I'll pick out the trash, so just collect them, senpai! If anyone comes by, they'll

scatter them even more!”

“No way! This is bad!”

She was making a scene with the first years as she fixed the mess she had created from her own klutziness. When they first met, the underclassmen also feared the Palmtop Tiger, the most terrifying animal at school. But because Taiga was her Christmas limited-edition good girl version of herself, right now she was the senpai they were closest to. They had even learned to deal with her klutziness.

Senpai, over there, over there! Over here, too! As Ryuuji watched Taiga going left and right in a flurry as she crouched down busily according to the voices of the underclassmen, his face pulled back ominously and twitched without him realizing it. He was smiling.

“Taiga apparently loves Christmas. Honestly, I don’t really get it but...she’s so excited about it. She’s saying this stupid stuff about being a good girl because Santa is watching.”

“Oh, so that’s what was going on. I get it, though. All girls love Christmas.”

“Is it that kind of a thing?”

“I’m not a young girl anymore, but I like Christmas... Tiffany, Cartier, Gucci, and Coach... Hermes, Bulgari, Dior, Vuitton, Chanel... Chloe, Bottega, Mark Jacobson... o-o-owaaaaaaah!”

“Whoa?!”

The BACHELORETTE used GREEDY FIRE!

RYUUJI shakes from fear!

Command ► RUN.

Couldn’t get away!

“I’m buying a reward for myself! It’s Christmas, so what’s stopping me?! I’ll buy a watch or a bag or an accessory. My budget is 300,000 yen! It’s my first

Christmas as a thirty-year-old, so it'll be a reward for working thirty hard years! That's why I'm allowed to buy it!"

"..."

"Wh-what are you staring at me like that for?! If there's something you want to say, then just say it!"

"..."

"Y-you must think that I'm wasting my money?! You must think buying a present for myself is just a spinster falling for marketing! You're probably just thinking, 'What a spinster! What a spinster!' Aren't you?!"

"..."

"No...please stop...please stop looking at me like that...Don't look at me! I know that it's just a waste of money, too! But-but-but! If I don't do something to get myself energized, then I won't have the strength to keep living! I don't even know what I'm working for! Waaah!"

"..."

"Ugh uh, it's extravagant, isn't it... I might be alone for my whole life, and I need about 70,000,000 yen for retirement, so squandering 300,000 yen on some show-off brand wouldn't even allow me enough money to die in the green...but, look. Look, if I worked hard to save up my money and didn't buy all the things I wanted to, and if I get to the point where I'm like, yay, I saved up 100,000,000 yen! What if Japan with its hyperinflation turns those savings into scraps of paper? Then what do I do? No really...huh? I see, maybe...maybe...I should buy a condo?!"

"..."

"I-I see... If I were to get a loan and buy a condo, that would be a perfect countermeasure against inflation, wouldn't it?!"

"..."

"Right, right, this is it! I don't have time to be buying brand-name stuff! I'll get together the down payment and buy a condo! I'll get a condo that's good for someone single, near the station. I'll get a fashionable new one! If I get married

later, I could just make it a rental! Kyah 🎵!”



“ ... ”

“Well, I might spend the rest of my life living there and end up dying alone and being found as a corpse...”

“ ... ”

From behind the bachelorette (with Mercury currently in retrograde...sob), Ryuuji saw the painful illusion of cold, powdery snow falling. He couldn't find words to say. He felt the absolute zero snow blowing from the eternal tundra called nihilism that ate away at the hearts of the glacier generation of Japan.

“That's the last one! Ryuuji, I got them all! Let's hurry and get to the gym. Kitamura's waiting!”

“Oh, ahh! Right!”

Once more holding the cardboard box, Taiga barked at him. She stamped in place telling him to go faster, faster. Ryuuji finally found his opportunity to run, bowed, and held his own box as he ran down the hallway after Taiga. *Ah! Don't run!* The voice of the bachelorette who had a hard time living, but planned to survive, echoed after them. They went down the stairs as if they were running from a curse.

They headed to the gym's storehouse with a box of confetti each. There, Kitamura's student council team should have been working on organizing the manufactured props. They originally meant to buy the confetti, so Taiga's group had to make up the full day of work that their handmade decoration ate up. *Hurry, hurry*, she muttered and urged herself along.

“Yo! Well, isn't it Taiga?!”

He noticed that surprised voice. This time, Ryuuji was close to scattering the confetti.

“Oh, Minorin! What a coincidence! Are you out here for softball?” Taiga stopped and answered with a smile. The stealthy wink she gave Ryuuji was probably meant to say, *Yay, aren't you lucky?*

“Of course, we were just weight training at the gym up until now. Kitamura-kun and everyone else was there, too. They looked busy.”

Minori also smiled and stopped. She was a little sweaty, judging by the apples of her cheeks, her hair was in a messy bun she had slapped up, and she was in her tracksuit. She was with several other second-year girls who were pulling on her sleeve.

“Kushieda, we have to hurry and go, or the coach will tell us off!” one cried.

A girl who stood behind Taiga where she had stopped also spoke to her in a hurried tone.

“Aisaka-senpai, we need to get going!”

Oh dear, oh my, you're quite right! See ya! Practically at the same time, the two of them started walking and reluctantly parted. Then, with that...

“Well...we only ever get to see her in passing lately.”

“Yeah...”

They saw what looked almost like a flash of light.

It was a gaze that hit him directly from the front, one he couldn't avoid.

He was sure Kushieda Minori was looking at him. He tried giving her a quick, immediate reply, but he couldn't get his face to settle on an expression, so his mouth twisted. When she saw that—when he was sure she saw it, Minori made a strange sound, as if she were joking around, “Ha heh.”

As she turned around and he saw her back, he desperately squeezed something out from his throat, which had been hardened by nerves.

“Th-the party! On Christmas Eve! It's definitely going to be fun! So you should come by, Kushieda!”

She might have heard him.

She should have heard him.

Minori turned around a little. She seemed somewhat distressed and like she was about to say something.

“Hurry!”

A girl pulling her along almost immediately grabbed Minori's arm and yanked her away. Based on her expression, the words Minori had wanted to say, but

had not been able to, probably weren't the response that Ryuuji had been waiting for. But she must have heard him. Ryuuji must have delivered the words he desperately had said to Minori.

We only ever get to see her in passing lately—it was true, all they did was pass by each other. It wasn't just lately either—it was for the last few days. They were separate in the morning, in the afternoon, and after school. Minori didn't come to the study group and she didn't go to her shifts at the family restaurant. The days where they passed by each other just stacked up.

But, even so.

Even so, Ryuuji believed.

He believed that if Minori would only come to the party, everything would fit into place.

Minori had said she was down. If she were festive, it wouldn't have been a good example for the others in the club, she had said. Somehow, he wanted her to get into the mood to at least drop by. All he could do was awkwardly invite her when they saw each other for a moment and prepare for when Minori did appear. Of course, he wanted to do a lot more. If there were something he could do, he would do it. He wanted to, but he didn't know how, so he could only watch Minori leave. He could only dwell on the full extent of his own uselessness.

But he at least had hope. He believed it from the bottom of his heart.

Minori would come on Christmas Eve, the party would be a success, everyone would be excited, and if everyone could smile—if they could do that—Minori would go back to being happy, and go back to her usual mood, and would even smile at him. Then, Ryuuji would be happy seeing that smile. Yes—basically, in the end, he wanted Minori to be happy. Ryuuji just wanted Minori to have a smile on her face and for her to turn a smile to him. That was more important and special than anything else.

He wanted Minori to be happy.

Right. At some point, his goals and the means of getting to them had switched places.

It wasn't "He would work on having a Christmas Eve party and wanted to invite Minori because she was down," but "He wanted Minori to be happy again, so he would invite her to the party so she could have fun." At that moment, those were Ryuuji's true feelings.

You deserve to be rewarded. The words whispered by the adult on their side echoed low in his chest like a blessing. That really was right. He really did want to be rewarded. He would do anything to work towards that, no matter how much sleep he lost. No matter how anxious he was, he would work hard. He could overcome several days of only seeing her in passing.

When he remembered that Minori's smile was just waiting for him in the coming days, he could overcome anything. Yes, anything—

"Ryuujiii! What do you think you're doing, you lazy useless oaf... I mean, you slightly ignorant, somewhat leisurely guy! Hurry up and get over here!"

"Right!"

"You're late! What were you doing? You really are a lazy useless oaf."

In the storehouse of the gym, which was filled with the smell of dust and sweat, he found Ami. She was sitting with her legs stretched out over the stack of mats as Kitamura and the rest of the student council were busily milling around beside her.

He spotted Murase, who was writing something on the whiteboard. "Hey." Ryuuji hit him on the butt.

Murase smiled and turned to him. "Yo."

He had met Murase from class A under rocky circumstances during the student council election, but after that, they got along better than expected and were now close friends. Murase poked and twisted the back of his pen into Ryuuji's armpit. *Stoop iiiit.* Ryuuji wriggled.

Behind the two boys, who were as foul to watch as they looked, there was another conversation happening.

"Hey, we just had an accident! What a hypocrite... Actually, what are you

doing here, Dimhuahua? Don't you have work to do? Are you skipping?"

"I'm part of the division with the student council first years that's making ornaments and small touches. I'm assigned here and doing painstaking work on these. See, look at this! Aren't I amazing?"

From her sitting position on the mats, Ami lifted a strand ornament of small bells on a long line. *We're going to wrap them around lights and put them on the tree. What do you think?* Ami waved it around with pride, but at that moment...

"Uwah?! Hey, hey, no! Why?!"

...several of the bells that she had painstakingly tied on, and should have been secure, chimed as they fell to the mat. Ami panicked as she tried to gather the rolling bells and several more rang as they fell. Taiga helped her pick them up.

"Kyaaa ha ha! Of course you'd do that, Dimhuahua! You're a klutz, a klutz! Yeah, you're back to the drawing board!"

"Hey...are you even allowed to say stuff like that?"

"...It was a regretful accident."

Oh, what a tragedy. As though she were acting in a play, Taiga went to her knees and held the bells out to Ami with a kindness that rivaled Santa's. Ryuuji pushed Taiga aside and took a look at what was in Ami's hands. He also sat down next to her, where she was making the ornaments with her eyes glued to the craft book. They looked easy enough to make.

Ami sat cross-legged. She puffed up her cheeks. The pose she sulked in made her look like the head of a prison gang.

"Chi, why did it end up like this? Ahh, it took an hour to get this far... I guess this simple work just isn't for me! Right, I, Ami-chan, should be in a role that lets me be flashy, stand out, and show off. I should be in a role that lets me radiate how brilliant, gorgeous, sweet, beautiful, cute, and pure I am..."

She flopped down on her back as she muttered nonsense. She was wearing shorts with zero sex appeal under her skirt, so she safely avoided flashing her panties, but her back cracked and made pitiful noises. Next to Ami, Ryuuji sat

down and poked at her pale knees, which were still stuck up in the air.

“If you have the time to grumble about it, then fix it. See, get up. Look. Right here. You didn’t tie them right. You have to put it through this ring or the rest of them will fall off, too.”

Ryuuji pulled the line skillfully through the top of the bell, tied a neat knot, and showed her how it was done. *Huh?* Ami pulled herself up and tilted her head.

“How did you just do that? What did I do wrong? I couldn’t see it because it was so fast. Do it again.”

“Okay, here...this goes...like this.”

Ryuuji used his long, skillful fingertips to slowly do it so Ami could easily see. Ami came close enough that he could smell her hair as she earnestly looked at his hands.

“No way, that looks like so much work... Actually, you mean I have to redo all of them? You can’t be saying that I need to undo and redo them all?”

“If you don’t, they’ll all just drop to the ground like they did earlier.”

“Kyah! No way?! Seriously?! This is the woorst! I thought this would be the easiest thing to do though! Hey, Yuusaku! I definitely can’t do this alone!”

“What?” When he heard his childhood friend’s shriek, Kitamura poked his head out from the very back of the deep, L-shaped storage room. He was wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt and pushing up his glasses. He’d acquired a thick coating of dust on his head, taken off his school jacket, and turned up the sleeves on his shirt. For some reason he carried a rusty track hurdle. This was what he had come to after the teachers had forced him to organize the storage room in exchange for using the gym. Of course, the patron saint of broken hearts was a newborn when it came to being class president and didn’t have the bargaining skill of the former president when it came to the teachers.

“What? Is it that hard?”

“It’s super, super, super hard! It’s too hard! I definitely can’t finish this alone!”

“Uhhh...then, sorry, but Takasu, can you help Ami? I’ll have Aisaka and

everyone else start working on this stuff before you.”

As Kitamura said that, Taiga had already secured some scissors and glue. She was assigning the first-year underlings work beside him. She looked at Ryuuji as though she had just noticed what had happened and blinked several times.

“Huh, Ryuuji is? He’s not working it with us? But we’re going to start making stars now—a ton of ’em.”

From behind her, Kitamura kindly stooped down to be at her level and explained it to Taiga with a smile. *I was thinking I’d have Takasu help Ami out.* It might have been because Taiga hadn’t had the time to turn red with how busy they had been for the last few days, or because she had gained immunity, but she was unexpectedly calm. Her eyes, however, were still bright as she nodded. *I see, got it.*

Casually, Kitamura took the scissors from Taiga’s clumsy hands and handed her some ridiculously much-too-large, star-shaped pattern paper. Right when she seemed in danger of dropping it, she overcame it and smiled. They seemed to smile at each other for a while and then Kitamura and Taiga went along into the back of the storeroom.

“Uh...”

You deserve to be rewarded.

Before he could think anything, the earlier echo of the thought resurfaced in his ears. He momentarily forgot what he was going to say. He even forgot that he thought it.

You deserve to be rewarded. That was exactly it.

Taiga’s work needed to be rewarded, too.

“Oh wow,” said Ami, “they look really close. Yuusaku and Tiger-chan. They seem pretty good for each other.”

“Don’t ramble like an idiot. We’re doing this. Anyway, you undo all the stuff you’ve already done.”

Geh, Ami scowled and disagreeably stuck out her tongue. Unlike Noto, Ami’s face was cute when she did that, even at a time like this. Without minding it,

Ryuuji sat next to her on the mat and skillfully pulled out more fresh line. He immediately started briskly tying small bells to it and kept going. Ami gave him a rude poke to the back with the knee of her crisscrossed leg.

“Hey, hey, how about we skip out? They wouldn’t notice if we did it now.”

“No. What’s with you, ‘Ami-chan?’ You don’t have any motivation. I thought you were putting your heart into getting everyone excited for this.”

“I am putting my heart into it. Everyone’s going to be excited. Well, you just watch. I’ll show you how amazing. I. Really. Am. But you know what, I’m just so tired today, and the air is stale in here, it’s super cold and smells like B.O., and it’s so noisy because of the sports clubs coming in and out. Just earlier, the girls from the softball club were carrying around barbells and making so much noise... Right, right, you missed them exactly—it was like they switched places with you, Takasu-kun.”

“I said, let’s get to work.”

Kya ha. ♥ Ami smiled as she watched the others busily moving for a while. Her large eyes turned to Ryuuji.

“You were so close. If you’d have just come a little earlier, you would have met a certain someone...ow.”

He put a bell on his palm, flicked it, and hit Ami right in the nose. Ryuuji narrowed his eyes. *I can’t hear you*, was what he basically meant by that. Ami grabbed her nose, and he turned his back to her.

“You’re the worst. I can’t believe you. I can’t believe you’d do something like this. I hate it when guys vent their anger. Venting it out on me won’t do anything just because you’ve been estranged from Minori-chan lately. It’s not my fault, anyway.”

“Of course it’s not. Who said it was your fault?”

“You’re in such a bad mood. It’s not a good look.”

“It’s because you’re skipping out on the work.”

“Okay, okay, okay. I’ll do it. Look, see, I’m working. Well, it’s not like I don’t understand why you’re in a sour mood. You keep only seeing the girl you like in

passing, and on the other side of things it looks like Tiger-chan is all cheerful. It's like, now that you're all left behind, Takasu-kun, you're just a tragic loner...ow ow ow ow!"

Poke! Poke! Poke! With three pokes to the head, he silenced her and then flicked her again for good measure.

"Was it you?!" he said. "It must have been you! You must have spread the weird rumor to our classmates!"

"Whaat?! What's wrong with you?! I don't understand what you're trying to say!"

Not backing down to the beautiful face that glared at him, he brought his own face closer to her. Ryuuji brought his voice as low as it could go.

"Like I said! That...Taiga...that Taiga I-likes Kitamura! Everyone's been trying to push them together! So it must have been you—"

"Like I know!"

She smacked him straight in the middle of the head with her fist. Ryuuji clammed up. It had been the first time he had been hit by a girl in a while. Come to think of it, it had been a week since Taiga had stopped beating him up. *Ow*. Ami shook her fist as though she were in pain. She snorted in dissatisfaction.

"Seriously! Why would you assume I'd do something like that?! Actually, I know what everyone's saying, of course, but I'm not gonna go cheering Yuusaku and Tiger on. In the first place, I don't care what they do, and Maya's all lovey-dovey ♥ about Maruo and about to blow her fuse. It's just, well, I agree with the class that they suit each other better than I expected. Hmph, they'll probably just move on right into dating, won't they? Then what'll you do? Would that upset you?"

"Why would it? I don't really care. I don't like people sticking their noses into other people's romantic lives... It's just weird and I don't like it, that's it...that's all."

"Oh..."

Looking at Ryuuji's face as he mumbled, the malicious glitter in Ami's eyes

returned.

“Aha. ♥ You’re kind of acting like a father giving away his bride?”

“Like that’s true. I’ve never had a daughter, and even if I have a dad, I’ve never seen him.”

“You’ve got a little girl, and you’ve been minding your own business and taking care of her forever. You make sure she doesn’t fall over, or get any cuts, or cry, you make sure she hasn’t gotten hurt or sick or died, and then some other guy comes along and tries to steal her away. A guy who you’re not even sure will take care of her and treat her like you’ve been. You’ve been treasuring her, and she’s just become pretty, and a guy who you’re not even sure has the power to protect her is pulling her out of the nest. Dads don’t get rewarded for anything, do they? No matter how much you hate it and how little you get in return, it’s not like you can keep her. You know the reason why? Fathers get older faster. They lose their strength and die. You’re instinctually afraid of leaving your daughter alone in the world after you die, so even though you hate it, you entrust her to a guy who will live longer than you and who is healthier than you.”

“Huh?”

What even is that?

Taiga’s actual father wasn’t nearly that admirable. He was unbelievably selfish and didn’t have any issues with leaving his immature daughter to live by herself. Ryuuji wasn’t Taiga’s father, either. Like he’d have a daughter at seventeen who was practically the same age as him. And speaking of which, there were plenty of girls without husbands who were living away from their fathers. There was Koigakubo Yuri-chan and Takasu Yasuko-chan. They weren’t weak maidens who had been left behind. They were adults making their way through the world with their own power and wits. Even though it seemed like they had a mountain of problems, that was just how they lived.

“What you just said is pretty sexist. It’s problematic. You’re someone’s daughter, too, so don’t look down on your sisters.”

“It’s not what I think. I’m just acting as a spokesperson for what all the fathers—what you—are thinking in your hearts. I’m just making it easier to

understand.”

“I’m not thinking that. Don’t just say whatever you feel like.”

He dismissed Ami’s words with a snort and focused his attention on the line and bells. He gently pushed the line through the small hole on the bell but missed and clicked his tongue at it. It wasn’t going well.

“But you can’t be enjoying this, right? Seeing Yuusaku and Tiger together? I can tell just by looking at your face. So that’s why you’re in such a bad mood. How perverted. You’re not even her father, and you’re not going to get old faster than her or die earlier, but you’ve been taking care of her and decided no one else can touch her. It’s like you’re even pretending you’re married with a wife. It’s like the three of you are playing house and each of you know your roles as the father, mother, and child.”

“Gaah! Really!”

The bell slipped right out of his hand. He pushed back his hair and automatically glared at Ami. He really might have been venting his anger.

In response to his glare, Ami’s gaze was quiet, without sarcasm or even spite.

“Hey. What are you going to do?”



“ ... ”

Her deep brown eyes were a little cold and looked as though they saw through everything. They looked straight through him to the point he couldn't even move a muscle. Ami looked deep into Ryuuji. It was as though she were looking deep into the bottom of his heart and stepping into it.

“But actually. If Tiger and Yuusaku get together, what are you going to do, Takasu-kun? That wouldn't bother you? Is it that you don't care about her as long as you're also with Minori-chan?”

He blinked. He licked his dry lips and forgot to even breathe when faced with Ami's stare. Finally, he remembered—he didn't have to answer Ami's question. It wasn't like he was under any obligation to. But when he tried to turn away, Ami grabbed his chin as though he were a girl about to be kissed. She kept him captive with an unexpected strength and fixed her stare on him at point-blank range. As she looked at him with eyes so big they were frightening, she asked him one more time:

“Are you fine with that? Hey, why are you playing dad for her? When did that start? Was it like that from the beginning?”

“Like I said, I don't remember ever being anyone's dad or anything.”

“What are you talking about? You're putting your heart into the role.”

Even if he averted his eyes, even if he brushed aside the hand that held his chin, he couldn't run from Ami's voice.

“The relationship between you and Tiger is way too unnatural. It's super weird. You should stop playing house like children. I think you must have been wrong to start playing it in the first place. Open your eyes before you really get hurt. Even the playing field. Then you can start again from the beginning. Let me in from the start, too. Make it so I'm not some outsider who came into your relationship after it had already started. Count me in as someone there from the start. If you could do that then I could...then I could also...then I—”

What could I do? Ami also stopped talking. Then, in a small voice she said, “I don't know.”

She turned her face to the side, but in the next moment, a smile came over her lips. “Forget I said any of that,” she whispered with the smile of an angel.

He couldn’t forget it, but he could try to pretend he had. Ryuuji still couldn’t decide what to say next, and he still couldn’t move his hands now that he had stopped them, so he looked back at Ami’s smile. Ami finally picked up the line and bells. She undid the line she had once tied and the bell dropped to her knees. It was a lot easier to tie fresh line than to undo what had already been done. As she was doing that, she said to herself in a low voice, “In the end, it’s hardest to understand yourself.”

That was it. Her face was hidden by her drooping hair, so he couldn’t really see it. The others were busily going back and forth, their hands full with their own work, so they didn’t notice the words of the faux angel on the mat.

Even the shadow of the doughnut-haloed, limited-edition seasonal angel wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

It was the last day of the end-of-semester exams.

They finished all their exams in the morning, so the end-of-day homeroom was filled with commotion. Though anyone would have been dead tired after three continuous days of testing, their young bodies had perked right up from the sense of liberation. They were up and already ready for winter break. Christmas was etched into their hearts. There were even some students grinning with the prospect of their New Year’s presents coming in the next month.

“Come on! I said to quiet down! Are you listening?! When you go home, don’t take any detours and don’t loiter anywhere! You have normal classes tomorrow and the next day, so you can’t get carried away by winter vacation! Are! You! Listening?!”

The single homeroom teacher (age 30) raised her voice, but it wasn’t like anyone would obediently settle down. They had finally been released from studying for the exams, and even if they had regular classes, they would just be getting back their scores and going over them. All that was left after that were the closing ceremonies—in other words, the Christmas Eve they were waiting

for, and the huge party that most of the class would go to in the gym. Not a single seventeen-year-old in the entire world would be able to sit quietly in their seat under these circumstances.

But Kitamura got them all to finally stand and do their end-of-day dismissal. Right when that ended, the class broke into conversation.

“Yaaaaaaahooooooooo! Our exams are ooooooveeeeer!”

“We did it~! We did it~! Winter break~! We’re on break~! I’m gonna have so much fun~!”

“What should I go eat? Where should I go before going home~?!
Kyaaaaaaaah~!”

The thirty-year-old could only smile painfully as the jubilant voices made all of class 2-C vibrate. The other classes must have been making the same commotion, too. The sound of laughter and high-pitched conversations echoed all around the classroom. Finally, as though vying against each other, the children pushed out into the hallway. They all tried to get out even a moment faster, as though they were breaking out of the jail that was school.

Ryuuji put his bag on his desk after he finished preparing to go home. He stretched out his stiff shoulders and back. He thought he did better on the exams than he ever had before. The points concisely summarized in the patriarch’s notes came up so often that he almost had fun with it.

“Phew! Good job! How ’bout we go out to lunch together already~?
Raaamen!”

“You don’t have any prep committee work today, right?”

Haruta and Noto, who had benefited from the patriarch’s notes like he had, hit him on the back.

“Right, well, today’s not great...”

What?! they said in unison. He scratched his head and mumbled through his lie.

In actuality, he wasn’t really sure what would come after “Today’s not great...” but he turned them down in the hope that he would have something to

do. After declining his friends' invitation, Ryuuji stared to his right. Because he hadn't slept, his evil eyes were bloodshot as he cursed—wait, no—as he prayed. His eyes were glued intently on two girls in the middle of conversation.

One of them was Taiga. Her long hair was still clipped up for the exams. She had forgotten to undo it as she talked. The other girl was Minori. Her bangs were also still tied up—probably for the exams, too—but she looked like the doll on the Kewpie mayonnaise bottles (and particularly like the doll from the Daigoro collaboration). Her hair stuck straight up as she listened to Taiga.

Yeah yeah. Minori shook her head, crossed her arms, and finally closed her eyes with a meek expression on her face. *Please just nod, please say yes,* Ryuuji quietly encouraged her. He formed his sweaty hand into a fist. Maybe it was because of the dry air, but his lips were peeling, so he licked them with his tongue. Because of his nerves, he also breathed raggedly.

“Ew, Takasu-kun looks way too excited.”

“He’s probably just imagining New Year’s cleaning or something.”

“Yeah, but it’s kind of scary.”

“Yeah, he does look kind of dangerous.”

Ryuuji was oblivious to the gazes of the scared girls around him as he huffed and puffed and continued to wait for Minori’s response.

In the end, his encouragement hadn’t been enough.

“Sorry! I’ve got practice coming up!”

Sooorry! Minori suddenly said to Taiga four times in a row. The conversation went like a sumo match. Minori had forced Taiga out of the ring with the brute force of her arms.

Ryuuji didn’t even have a sitting cushion to throw at the end of the match. From a slight distance away, his shoulders drooped. As if to add insult to injury, Taiga conspicuously turned to Ryuuji. She made a face that looked something like a strangled corpse and stuck out her tongue as she used her thumb to mime cutting her own throat—okay, maybe it wasn’t that conspicuous, but anyway, it was her signal that things hadn’t gone well. He didn’t need it though, since he

had already heard everything.

The angel Taiga had been suggesting that the three of them, including Ryuuji, get lunch together that day. That was what she was inviting Minori to, but their mission was a failure. Forced out of the ring, Taiga dejectedly retreated back to Ryuuji.

“Oh well, Minorin said she had softball stuff...”

“I got it. I got it. I heard the whole thing.”

“Gweh!”

“I said I got it.”

Maybe she wasn't fully confident that he had understood, because she mimed cutting her neck again. If anyone nearby were watching, it really didn't look good. He apologetically averted his eyes when it happened.

“Oh. Sorry, I'm really sorry I can't go even though you went out of your way to invite me.”

“Yeah. No, um, it's not really, like—y-you and Taiga haven't really had a good chance to take some time to talk in a while, so I thought...”

“Well, I've really gotten on the bad side of my coach, so the practices have been really tough.”

For days, he had missed Minori by chance... Well, it wasn't actually just by chance. Now Minori's voice was close to him. Minori laughed as though embarrassed and her tied-up bangs bobbed slightly.

“Those...bangs. Are you okay leaving them like that?”

“Huh? My bangs? What about them? Oh?! Gyaaaohh!”

It seemed that she had forgotten that they were tied up. Once Ryuuji pointed them out to her, she touched them, noticed she looked like Daigoro, and pulled off the elastic band in a fluster.

“Why didn't you say anything, Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta—oh, I got it off!” She hit Taiga's unguarded forehead with both her hands and Taiga simply fell over without a sound.

“Weeeeell, that was close! I was about to go to softball like that! Ahh, that was way too embarrassing, and now my hair’s poking out at a weird angle... Oh no!”

Her bangs splayed out in weird directions. She held them as her face turned red. Ryuuji sputtered. Her weird bangs were funny, but it was Minori’s cute embarrassment that had really gotten him.

“Kawashima probably keeps hair mousse or something in her locker?” he said.

“It’s fine. It’s fine. Water will do the trick. This is terrible. I know, I’ll put this on.”

Minori shook her head wildly back and forth. Then she put on her uniform cap, which had been in a pocket of her sports bag. She pulled it low as though to cover her face.

“Yeah, that works. I thought you were about to pull out your bald cap...but if you put a cap on indoors, you might actually go bald.”

“If I said I don’t mind! A shock for you! Baldness falls upon me! In order to protect my thick and luscious hair...ah, I’m having trouble singing today, ah well! See ya tomorrow!”

Then, without even giving him enough time to wave, she turned around and left. She was as fast as the wind and didn’t even say goodbye to them.

Even after he lost sight of her, he still wanted to talk with her more. In the end, Minori hadn’t used the patriarch’s notes for the test, so he wanted to talk about how helpful they were, and to tell her that the prep for Christmas Eve was going steadily forward, and that most of the class was going to the party so she should go, too—he wanted to talk to her about stuff like that.

The next opportunity he had, he definitely wouldn’t let her escape. With anguish pulling at his face, he closed the front button of his school jacket. He wasn’t trying to cover his intestines, which were spilling out of his stomach after having been gutted...and he definitely wasn’t laughing it off. In the first place, something like that wouldn’t have been funny. No, he was just motivated and high-spirited. Next time, he would definitely, definitely not let her escape. He still had a chance the next day, and the day after that, when they had normal classes.

In order to be rewarded, in order to have a happy Christmas, he would definitely invite Minori out to the Christmas Eve party. In order to see Minori's real smile, he would wholeheartedly invite her.

"Ahh, that was a surprise... Is blood spurting out of my forehead?"

"If it were...I don't think you'd be okay right now."

Taiga, who had been hit in the head and flipped to the ground, finally stood up. She rubbed at her head as she sighed regretfully.

"Minorin ran from us again."

"She said she had softball, so she couldn't do anything about it. It's fine. There will be other opportunities."

"Ahhh...it's like you give up too easily and she senses it coming... I was thinking of trying to get you two alone together, though. I was going to go with you up to the restaurant and then when we got to the front, I would have been like, 'Oh! I remembered I had something I needed to do!' or something like that."

"Wow, you're so passionate, angel Taiga-sama. You even had such a thoughtful lie ready."

Ryuuji, who had ended up being free, looked around the classroom. He didn't expect Kitamura, who was very busy, to be around, and it seemed that Noto and Haruta had already gone to eat their raaah-men. He didn't want to eat alone after finally being liberated on the last day of exams, but he didn't have anyone to eat with. No, he did have someone to eat with. She was right in front of his eyes.

"Ah well, let's eat something on the way home. We can even think through our next plan."

"I can't. I actually have something I need to do for real. Not a lie."

What?! Like a child, Ryuuji stared at the top of Taiga's head as though shooting a beam from his eyes.

"What do you mean you have plans?!"

"I need to go to the post office really quick. Once I'm done with that, I'll eat

somewhere.”

“What do you mean? You could go to the post office really fast and then come with me to eat. I can even make stuff at home.”

“I need to go home first and get the stuff ready. Actually, what’s with you, you’re depres...”

“I’m depres-what? Yeah, finish what you were saying. Santa and I are listening.”

“Depressing...not. But sometimes, I-I-I can’t not not not not not stand being near you...?”

“...?”

She probably didn’t even know what she was saying. Taiga scowled and slowly tilted like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Ryuuji, who was listening to her, also tilted. Together, they both tilted about thirty-five degrees like mirror images.

“There you are, Takasu-kun! Hey hey hey hey! Are you busy?! You’re not right! I had something I needed to ask you. How about you come with us to lunch?! You’d be the only guy, but that’s okay, right?! Right?!”

The one who came up to him, making him automatically want to draw back in desperation, was Maya. Nanako and Ami wore faint, sly smirks as they hung behind Maya, who was also smiling, and seemed to be most spitefully enjoying what was happening. As she came closer and closer, he felt like he could see “Maruo” written in her right eye and “Tiger” in her left, and on her forehead. Frankly, he considered the invitation from the trio of beautiful girls from 2-C a slight—no—a huge pain.

He replied without thinking. “Uh, well...sorry, I’ve got something I need to do.”

That was a lie.

“What?! Really?! We can wait for whatever it is!”

“No no, I need to go to the post office.”

“Then we’ll go with you! And then we can go to lunch!”

“I need to grab some packages at Taiga’s place to take over there. If you’d be willing to invite Taiga, too, then it’d be okay.”

Like it’d ever be okay?! said her right eye. *Read the mood!* said her left. Maya spoke to him eloquently with just her eyes, but she closed her mouth and retreated without being able to do anything. She pushed up her nicely-dyed, pretty, long hair as she said, “I got it. But next time, you definitely need to talk with me, okay? The two of us are bound by fate in a way that no one else knows. We’re badgers in the same hole...”

She dropped a whispered secret right into Ryuuji’s ear. He felt that since he hadn’t immediately addressed Maya’s misunderstanding, it would probably bring a storm of troubles on him in the not-too-distant future. On that day, though, he didn’t have the energy to deal with it.

Well, see ya! He waved a hand at the beautiful trio hurriedly and had Taiga take her bag. She was dumbfounded as he pushed her so that they could escape into the hallway.

They headed down the stairs together toward the exit side by side and Taiga glanced up at Ryuuji’s face.

“What’s with you lying like that? Actually, what’s with that valley girl acting like she knows Kitamura-kun? What’s she trying to make you do? Oh, pretend that didn’t happen. We’ll redo this. I wonder what that f-friendly Kihara-san is up to.”

“Who knows? It doesn’t matter, so let’s go to the post office. If we go, then it won’t be a lie.”

Taiga narrowed her eyes for a moment as though she really was annoyed, but it seemed like she couldn’t find a way to refuse Ryuuji’s pushing while still being a “good girl.”

“Mergh...” she groaned in a low voice, like a cow. She gave up and started heading home with Ryuuji.

“Were...you thinking of taking these all by yourself?”

“I was, why? I did it last year. I had one cart in each hand.”

Rattle rattle, creak creak. The wheels of the grating cart transferred the holes and dimples from the asphalt to his hands. Taiga and Ryuuji each had one and pushed as they walked. It felt as though they were competing to see who would fold under the weight of the packages first.

Even normally, walking from the corner of the street they lived on to the post office would take more than fifteen minutes. Partway through, there was a harsh upward slope, a twisty and windy sudden downward slope called the “serpent hill” that was really tight, and then there was a promenade. Incidentally, on that day, the northern wind was blowing cold and strong enough to make their throats grow numb. It was so cold that he couldn’t fully open his eyes.

He couldn’t have even guessed he would have been in these straits, carrying so many packages over that road. He wavered between being glad he offered to help and considering whether he offered too quickly. No matter how he felt and how close he was to whining, Taiga was also absorbed in pulling a cart a little ahead of him that was just as loaded up as his. Below her coat, the hem of her long dress moved in the wind and the heels of her boots rang out.

When Ryuuji had changed and gone to her condo, Taiga had already snugly, though clumsily, tied the heavy packages down onto the cart with packing string. The pile of packages was heavy and large but wrapped in pretty paper.

“So, what is this? What are these packages?”

“I’m going to be sending them out. See, we’re here. Careful of the stairs, up we go—”

Heave ho! They pulled the heavy carts towards the entrance of the post office they had finally made their way to. They clumsily crab-walked up the three flights of stairs. Far from being a barrier-free world, the door wasn’t even automatic, and Taiga could only rudely push it open with her butt while going backwards and holding her cart. Ryuuji had been praying they would get there, so he didn’t have the right to tell her off. It really had been an arduous journey.

They had finally made it into the small post office.

“Huh?! What’s with this line?!”

“Whoa...looks like everyone’s dead tired...”

People young and old, male and female, filled the office in its confusion. It might have been because the end of the year was coming, or because it was the season for gifts, or maybe because it was right in the middle of when offices took their lunch breaks, but the small area was filled with people to the point it was suffocating. In the worst-case scenario, it was the type of rush hour where someone might catch a cold.

However, no one was in line at the single delivery window. *Oh, that’s not bad.* Ryuuji approached it but was held back by the staff. They were told to take a number from the machine, and when he ripped one off, the digital numbers told them that they were the seventh in line. Why did they need to wait so long just to prepare stuff for delivery?

“Ahh, we got here at a bad time. I guess we can only sit down on the sofas and wait... There isn’t even a place to sit.”

“Oh well. You wait and watch the stuff over here for a while. I don’t have packing slips, so I’m going to fill them out while we have time.”

All right, Ryuuji thought. He pushed the two carts to the wall and leaned his stiffening back against it as he watched Taiga’s long skirt flutter when she turned around. He thought he might re-tie the strings on the packages while he was waiting and reached out to the hard knots.

“...”

Without thinking, he stopped.

What is this? he accidentally said out loud.

He hadn’t meant to look. He had seen it anyway. He saw it on the giant boxes wrapped in very Christmas-y wrapping paper that were even beautifully tied with bows. He had seen it already had a packing slip on it.

The destination was for a high-class district in Tokyo’s heart. The addressee was Aisaka Rikuro-sama. *It couldn’t be*, he thought. He found another box that looked similar. This time, he had a firm purpose when he checked it. On it was

written the same address and the addressee Aisaka Yuu-sama.

“Hey, could you put this on the biggest one at the bottom...what?”

“What is this... Why are you sending these to them?”

He didn't have the right to complain. He wasn't in the place to. He knew that, but he couldn't just silently stand by. He couldn't not question it. He was so shaken that he almost felt dizzy, but in front of his eyes, Taiga didn't change her expression by a beat.

“I could have sent it from the department store, but I wanted to put a card in it and things from other stores, so I decided to send it myself. I bought a zip-up knitted jacket for playing golf at the department store. I got them in matching gray and pink from a brand that I think they'd like. I also got Mariage Frères black tea and an earthenware cup that seemed good for beer, and then—”

“That's not—”

His voice stuck in his throat and he coughed. He tried again.

“That's not it! Is this for your old man and your stepmom? Christmas presents? Are you serious?! Are you out of your mind?! You're not thinking of trying to make up again, are you?!”

“If it weren't Christmas, I would have beat you up for looking. But I'm a good girl, so I'll forgive you. These are just presents I'm sending home to my parents, and I'm serious and in my right mind. Is that all?”

“Why are you doing this?!”

“Because it's Christmas. And it's my parents. You know what, this is supposed to be a secret, but I got presents for you and Ya-chan, too. That's right. That other day on Sunday, I said I'd be studying at home, but I really went around the department store, and—”

“That's not what we're talking about!”

At Ryuuji's voice, Taiga stopped for a moment. It didn't seem like she had suddenly been overpowered by his loud voice. Ryuuji was still shaken, but before his eyes, Taiga actually rather quietly and calmly narrowed her eyes. Her breathing was quiet and, as though she were trying to teach him how to have a

reasonable conversation, her voice was low.

“I really do understand what you’re trying to say. But right now, I don’t want to listen to that. That’s why I didn’t want you to come.”

This time, Ryuuji was silent, and it also wasn’t because he had been overpowered, either.

So she really did understand. If she understood, then why would she do this? He couldn’t organize the questions that overflowed from his throat, and his words wouldn’t come out. *Why Taiga, why are you doing this?*

Regardless of how many times she claimed it was because it was Christmas, he couldn’t believe that she would give gifts to a father who had abandoned her and a stepmother who had been the reason for her abandonment. They betrayed and hurt her over and over and, as a natural consequence, left her completely isolated on a daily basis. They practically loathed and hated each other, so why was she being friendly to them just because it was Christmas? Why was she putting on this performance, purposefully feigning a good relationship, and sending them presents? If it were some sort of theatrical version of sarcasm, he might have been able to understand it.

However, he couldn’t possibly accept “Because it’s Christmas” as a reason. Even Ryuuji felt that he had been betrayed by Taiga’s father. So why was Taiga doing this?

It seemed that Taiga had decided to table it. She took a small breath and calmly continued with her work. With her small, pale child’s hands, she slapped the packing slips that she had filled out onto the tops of the boxes. He found those slips strange, too.

The addresses Taiga had written were in beautiful cursive, so he almost couldn’t tell what language they were in at first glance. When he looked really, really closely, the destination was Tokyo, written in English. The sender, however, wasn’t Aisaka Taiga and didn’t contain the address of the street they were on. Instead, there was a name that started with an S written out in English.

“Santa...Claus...”

“It’s for volunteer work. Or something like that. It’s our turn. If you’re not upset by it, could you help bring over the packages?”

The older man at the post office window read back each delivery address in order to confirm they were correct. Several of them were addressed to churches and child welfare services.

She said that the all-girls school near her parents’ house that she attended since she was in elementary was Catholic.

“I didn’t get into the high school, though. I got cut for bad behavior.”

When Ryuuji heard the name of the school, which was well known widely in the world as the place daughters of rich families went, the hand Ryuuji was using to eat his seven hundred eighty-yen pasta (with a drink, salad, and lunch soup) unintentionally stopped in its tracks. Taiga, who also was eating the same pasta in front of his eyes, continued without noticing his expression.

“Volunteering was essential to the school, so we had to go around to churches and institutions with the sisters. Then we’d go help with chores and show the—I don’t like to call them this—but we would show the less fortunate kids how to play games. The packages from earlier are things I’m sending to the places I visited back then. They’re all places with kids who can’t live with their parents. I send them toys, candy, books, manga, sports equipment, dictionaries, reference books, encyclopedias, themed stationery... Of course, even a good girl can’t send presents to the whole world, and I don’t want to get caught up in any weird fraud schemes, so I do whatever is within my means for places that I know and trust.”

“So less fortunate kids come right after your parents. Hmm...”

He knew that Taiga was looking at him, but he didn’t intend to stay silent. He didn’t want to blame her or stop her from what she was doing, though.

“Sorry, but I don’t get it. I don’t get what you’re trying to do.”

There was just something he had to say.

It was just too unlike the “Aisaka Taiga” he knew. It felt wrong to him—it

didn't feel wrong in a moral sense, but it just didn't sit right with him, and he couldn't understand. It seemed like she was purposefully acting weird, and it seemed like an obvious lie, so he couldn't help but ask what her true intentions were.

Taiga was stubborn, arrogant, and conceited. She was supposed to be cocky as the terrifying, strongest beast, the Palmtop Tiger. At the same time, she couldn't lie, didn't know how to put on an act, and was clumsy to the point of absurdity—that was Aisaka Taiga. When Taiga had told him “I’m going to be a good girl until Christmas,” he believed her, though he didn't get her reasoning. He thought that it would be a good thing for what it was.

Honestly, since then Taiga hadn't gotten into fights with anyone—even Ami—she hadn't rampaged, and she studied for tests as she earnestly prepared for the party with the others. It had gotten to the point where she gained the trust of those around her, and things seemed to be going well. Ryuuji himself was also no longer at the mercy of Taiga's unreasonableness, stubbornness, or jeering. He had his share of calm days. Then, when it came to Kitamura, Taiga had gotten close enough to her crush to the point that it made his chest stir in a way he didn't understand.

But he thought that this—that she was doing something like this—was overdoing it, no matter what the circumstances were. This was too different from Taiga's regular self. To be frank, he thought it was an obvious sham and beyond the scope of reason.

Taiga took a spoonful of the somewhat tasteless soup from the lunch set and breathed out a sigh. Normally, whenever Ryuuji was being a busybody and nagging at her, Taiga would have showered him in jeers like, “You yappy dog!” She probably would have double-slapped him and that would have been the end of it, but it seemed that Taiga intended to continue her uncanny act. Putting aside the topic of her parents, she was slow to make her preliminary remarks.

“It's because I want to show them that someone's watching.”

She pushed up her long hair, which flowed over her turtleneck sweater. She wiped off the parsley on her lips with a paper napkin and started explaining it to

him.

“Christmas is an opportunity for that. Even if you don’t have parents to raise you, even if you don’t believe in a god, even if you don’t believe in Santa, someone is still watching—that’s what I want to tell them. I want to tell them that when Christmas comes, that there really is someone named Santa Claus who sends them piles of toys and candy. I want to show them that there really is someone in the world thinking about them... I want them to believe, they want to believe...that’s...satisfying enough for me. Right. Basically, it’s just for my own satisfaction. That’s it.”

She might have been mocking herself with her gentle smile. Taiga shrugged her shoulders as she grinned and poked at the bacon in her pasta.

“Hypocrite. Self-righteous. That’s exactly what I am. I already know. You don’t need to remind me. I’m not doing this for the kids. I’m just satisfying my own desire to do it. I pretend to be a good girl like this for myself, because I want to believe. I want to believe that someone, somewhere is really watching me. For me, that’s Santa.”

“You were going on and on about Santa earlier... You were serious about that?”

“It’s silly, right?”

He couldn’t reply to the look she gave him as she ate her bacon. She was even smiling faintly, and her eyes were lit up bright.

“I actually, really love Christmas. The streets, the stores—everything, everywhere is glittering and bright and pretty... Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves. To me, it just feels like happiness is in the air, it’s here and there, and it’s like it’s overflowing, and everything seems whole. I wonder whether I could become part of that, too. If only I could be part of that happy scene—I would do good things and be a good girl. I want to become another happy smile under the lights of the streets during Christmas. And also—”

What could anyone say to Taiga after seeing her face, after seeing the look that quivered in the back of her half-closed eyes? What could anyone say to her? Taiga’s voice, which was almost a whisper to herself, was so faint and hoarse it was almost swallowed by the noise of the restaurant.

“And also, I’ve actually really met Santa before. Well, it might have really just been a dream...but I still have the memory. It was when I was really little. My mom and dad were still at home and on the night of Christmas Eve, I was sleeping under the tree in the living room. I think I must have been waiting for Santa. I woke up when it suddenly got cold, and I saw that it had started snowing outside. So I got up, and when I went to the window...there he was. Santa was right outside. I was so surprised. I opened the window for him. Santa came in from the window and drank the milk under the tree, and ate the biscuits, and then gave me a present. Then he said this: If you keep being a good girl, I’ll come again.”

She traced out the memory in the air, her gaze wavering faintly, but then she pinched her mouth closed like she had come back to her senses. Then, as though making an excuse to Ryuuji, who remained silent, she dropped her eyes to the corner of the table.

“Well, that was a childish dream. I tried opening the present, but I only remember as far as unwrapping the ribbon. After that... But it was a really happy dream. At least that’s true. That’s the one and only precious memory I have of Christmas. So that’s why I want to be a good girl. Believing in a dream... isn’t that stupid? Isn’t it stupid to pretend because I believe someone’s watching? Do you think I’m weak?”

Ryuuji could only think one thought in that moment.

How could he reply without hurting Taiga? That was it.

Then, slowly, Ryuuji shook his head. “I don’t think that,” he awkwardly muttered. Hearing that, Taiga smiled wider and once again went after her pasta. While watching her open her mouth wide, Ryuuji felt a cold silence fall on his heart. No matter what, he still ended up thinking it. Someone who believed that someone was watching, was a person who basically lived without anyone watching. No one paid any attention to Taiga—that was how she went through life. Except for Santa, whom she had met in her dream. Other than Santa, no one had watched Taiga growing up. On the glittering and radiant night of Christmas Eve, Taiga had been consistently alone.

Whenever he caught glimpses of that deep scar, that deep solitude, he felt

something close to fear. It was almost like despair, a bottomless darkness.

What should I do? he thought.

What could he do about Taiga's solitude, which had built itself up day after day without relief until now? Taiga smiled as she ate her pasta. She smiled because she loved Christmas. She smiled because she was a good girl. She smiled because she was paralyzed. It was because she'd been left to feel pain that she believed was normal.

If he couldn't do anything to help her, then was he supposed to leave her as is? That was impossible. *But. But—but. But.*

"It was a dream, so it's fine. It's not real. It's not like I'm dependent on someone who actually exists. This is a dream, a fantasy, it's in my imagination. So...I'll believe that and believe that someone is watching. I'll pretend like I'm a good girl. That's not weakness, is it?"

Was it a dream or reality?

It must have been a dream. It might have been her crummy father's one and only attempt at planning something for her, but to Taiga, that would be as flimsy as a dream. It wasn't weak, but it was sad. If he told her that honestly, it would definitely hurt her.

"Sorry for telling you what to do... After hearing you out, I agree. I get it. I think you really are being a good girl. So, you can have dessert, too!"

He smiled and pushed the dessert menu at Taiga. "Oh, wait, wait." Taiga finished up the last bit of pasta and started choosing between the colorful desserts with glittering eyes.

Ryuuji propped his head in his hand in order to keep her from realizing the sense of powerlessness he had suddenly been assaulted by in a chain pasta store in the early afternoon.

They lived on the same planet, breathed the same air, and walked under the same sky. They were close as family, but he still couldn't actually see Taiga for what she really was in times like this. He should have known well enough how hard it was for people to understand each other, but his heart really felt close to breaking at his uselessness and immaturity. Being able to understand her and

being able to avoid hurting her were things that existed in separate dimensions.

He didn't mind losing sight of someone who was far away. If someone left the path they were on to continue down their own path, he wanted to be able to give them a farewell filled with love and respect. Ryuuji knew that if you believed in romance, then no matter how far you were, things would end up fine.

But.

What could he do for this person who was just a few dozen centimeters away from him? What could he do when she must still be in pain, even now? What could he do when she was being tortured and when he couldn't do anything for her with his own hands? If she only called for his help—if she just noticed her own open wound and saw that it was still bleeding, something could be done about it.

Was the world so cruel that even someone like her—someone with a raw, open wound—had to walk alone? If that were true, then God and Santa couldn't exist in the world. If that were true, salvation couldn't exist, and no one was watching.

Chapter 4

It was four in the afternoon on December twenty-third.

Market Kanou (LLC)'s small truck came in through the school gate, leaving ruts on the school grounds. It parked alongside the entrance to the gym. In that moment, the guys waiting for it came running over and each thanked the driver from the local neighborhood supermarket. The store had been a large sponsor of the cultural festival and was owned by the previous student council president's parents (in other words, the driver was Kanou Sumire's father). They each bowed their heads to him as they climbed into the truck bed. Then, they exclaimed in low, amazed voices at how large the items in the truck were and at the beautiful flashes of color they could see through the packing material, "Whoa..."

"This is amazing... If we put this up, it'll definitely be amazing!"

Ryuuji and the others untied the packing twine. Their eyes only grew wider. Working from the mental image they got from the scattered parts, it would probably be gigantic and magnificently gorgeous once it was put together.

"All right! We'll split it up and carry it in!"

In response to Kitamura's strident command, which exposed his sports background, Ryuuji and the dozen others from the prep committee thrust their fists in the air. *Right!* Even though school and classes had already ended, they were all excited. Of course they would be, because the thing that had been packaged and delivered to them on the truck was the symbol of the party—the Christmas tree. It was an extravagant one at that, so the voltage among the prep committee members was naturally on the rise.

But even though it was a tree, it wasn't a real Japanese fir, but a man-made imitation. The parts that filled the truck bed had a curious pearlescent sheen as they glittered. It even came with several gold and silver sphere ornaments that seemed like they might be as big as a person's head. Someone exclaimed out loud, "Those are some giant gold balls!" He held one and got a low kick from Kitamura to the back of the knees. Some other guy stole the ball from that guy's

hands but ended up thoughtlessly holding two golden spheres, “Oh no...” Ryuuji, who had been watching, accidentally blurted, “Bwah ha!” and felt somewhat resentful, as though he had lost. The cardboard box he held in his hands was probably filled to the brim with nothing but lights, cables, and other things.

He heard the first years laughing and talking amongst each other as they passed behind him.

“Doesn’t it kind of feel like it’s really authentic?”

“Actually, will we even be able to put this thing up by ourselves?”

“Worrying isn’t helping anyone. Anyway, let’s do it! We’ll put our hearts into it!”

At those words, Ryuuji hurried, and his legs went faster. *Right, let’s put our hearts into it!* he thought in reply.

They had gone for a human wave attack strategy and each held as many parts as they could as they brought them to the gym one after another. That day, the committee members were working on a tight schedule. They would put up the tree, which seemed like it would be time consuming, and then would store it in the backstage space once it was complete. When the ending ceremonies were over the next day, they would immediately pull it out and set up the venue.

The tree was sure to look super realistic. The person who had brought it in for them had been the old man from Market Kanou, but the leading star in its acquisition was...

“Wow! ♥ It’s finally here! Make sure you’ve got all the parts that go with it~! If we’re missing even one, it won’t be complete! Fight on!”

...Kawashima Ami herself, who was in the middle of the gym with the other girls preparing the decorations. The team of girls were also incredibly excited at the appearance of the tree, and seeing the guys holding the parts, they cheered in high voices and came over to help. Ami spotted Ryuuji and stood.

“How does it look?! What do you think of this tree?! Do you see how amazing I really am now?!”

She smiled proudly. Of course, Ryuuji bowed his head and spoke his deep admiration to Ami-chan-sama.

“I really do get it now. It’s an amazing tree! You really are amazing! I’ll acknowledge that!”

“Right, right?! When it’s set up, it’s super, super, super pretty!”

The tree was sourced from a certain new establishment in the middle of the city that was the talk of the town. Some magazine companies sponsored an early Christmas party for a pack of fashion industry bigwigs there. A certain actor and actress were invited, and it had apparently been a big enough party that even a talk show reporter crashed it.

Ami had been working at the fashion show that was the party’s main event and, right after it ended, she’d said to the organizers, “I really would like this tree. ♥ It’d be great if you could give it to me for free, too. ♥” It seemed because the magnificent tree that had been the center of the gathering was set to be demolished after the party anyway, they were fine with giving it to her in the spirit of *mottainai*. So, the next problem was how to transport it.

Ami went with them when they pulled the tree apart so she could collect all the dispersed parts, and, out of goodwill, one of the magazine staff members who had also been working as a model brought the parts to a nearby affiliated office warehouse by car. Since the staff member was already doing her a favor, Ami couldn’t ask the person to drive the tree all the way to the school—that was just a little too far. The tree was also slightly too big and hefty to have it delivered by post. Kitamura immediately figured out Ami was about to pay for the expenses out of pocket, and he wouldn’t let her, saying, “That’s too expensive for a high school student to pay for a high school event.” However, if they billed it to the expense account, their already meager budget would be obliterated immediately.

So the one who stepped up at that point was none other than the owner of Market Kanou. He roared into the roads of the inner city with his small truck on a weekday for the event at the school his daughter, the former student council president, had literally reigned over. He went all the way to Ami’s warehouse and back to move the whole tree for free.

The sounds of passionate voices thanking him once again crossed through the gym as Kanou came in lugging the parts with the other guys.

“Mister! Thank you so much!”

“Couldn’t expect less from the patriarch’s father. He’s a man among men! I love you!”

“I’m going to make sure my family shops at Market Kanou from now on! I’ll make sure to tell my mom!”

“I think your fish is the best around. You’re thorough about showing the processing facilities the vegetables come from, and you make sure the producers’ faces are visible, and you even have a full assortment of Fauchon spices. Oh, right, the introduction to Kyoto veggies event from the other day was really fun! I ended up buying the manganji togarashi peppers, and I couldn’t believe how good they were! I hope you get more stuff in! Oh, and I’ll definitely go to the annual end of the year tuna butcher show! Can’t wait for that tuna!”

There was one weirdo among them who knew a little too much about Market Kanou, but Kanou seemed delighted. He was a little brusque as he smiled, and with that, he turned his back to the boisterous children. At that point...

“Uh. Ahh...thanks...”

“Don’t mention it...”

...he bumped into Taiga, who was bringing other things in from the classroom. Taiga awkwardly jerked her chin and gave him a small bow with just her head. That must have been awkward, too, since Taiga had been in a bloodbath fight with the Kanous’ pride and joy—their eldest daughter. It hadn’t even been a month since Taiga had gone with the homeroom teacher to apologize to the family.

However, old man Kanou was a man among men.

“Looks like you’re doing well,” he muttered in a low voice, nodding a few times as he looked Taiga over. The wrinkles on his harshly sunburned cheeks deepened as his eyes squinted. Then on that note, he left the gym for real this time.

“Uwah, that scared me. Why’s that bygone president’s old man here...”

As Taiga stood in place and blinked, Ryuuji told her the news he had only learned about just the other day.

“There’s a first-year girl in the student council, right? Apparently, she’s the patriarch’s little sister.”

“What?! Well, actually I have heard that before. I completely forgot about it.”

No waaay, ahaaa, what an amazing tree! They turned their eyes to a girl who was squealing happily with her fellow first years. She seemed sort of soft.

“...They don’t look alike at all.”

“...No resemblance.”

The two of them nodded to each other. Someone behind them poked their backs.

“Heeey, don’t slack off! I just got an amazing tree, so go and put it together!”

To finish it off, Ami pushed them hard enough to make their legs buckle. If only they’d had time to complain about her roughhousing...but they noticed that the others had already started to unpack, so Ryuuji and Taiga hurriedly joined in on the work.

Ami distributed copies of the completed tree’s diagram to them, and several students looked over them together.

“This is...oh, it’s the parts for the roots.”

“What is this?”

“It might be the top?”

They turned over and messed with the dismantled parts. It almost felt like one giant puzzle.

Ryuuji also grabbed one of the parts.

“Whoa, they’re light. Is it made from Styrofoam?”

“The insides are. They’re painted. Once it’s put together, it looks really pretty. It’s lit up like this, and it’s like super pearly and shimmery...oh! Right, right, we

need a spotlight! Yuusaku!”

Abandoned by Ami, Ryuuji lost track of what he was supposed to be putting together. He searched around for someone who could show him a copy of the diagram.

“Oh, Takasu-kuuun! That probably goes with this!”

“Which? Right! It does!”

Someone from another class called out to him, and he hurried over holding the part. When they pressed the concave and convex pieces together hard, they really did pop right into each other. *It’s perfect*, he smiled at them. *Thank you!* they smiled back at him. *I’m sure I saw another one that was the same shape, so I’ll go get it.* He started running off again. He searched through the scattered parts one at a time, and as he did that, he ended up having a strange thought, *I couldn’t use the Samurai Resurrection plan again if something happens.*

During the student council presidential election, he’d utilized his own wicked face, which had given him a frightening reputation, in order to get an unwilling Kitamura to run in the race. He entered the race with Taiga, the Palmtop Tiger, and they had devised a Samurai Resurrection-style plan to flawlessly take on the role of villains and lure Kitamura into their trap. Their goal had just been to rile everyone up.

But before he noticed, he became friends with students from various classes who joined the committee while working on the party. The same had even happened to Taiga.

“Aisaka-san, you seem like you’d be lightweight, so could you get on my shoulders and put this on there?”

“Huh, like with my slippers that have been all over the bathroom floor?! Well, to each their own...”

“No, please take them off...”

A good way away from him, Taiga was talking and smiling with girls whose names Ryuuji didn’t know. *Tiger-san’s tights! Her feet! That’s hot! Here comes her foot!* There were some maniacs who were getting carried away with saying nonsensical things, but putting them aside...

Ahh, what a relief.

To be honest, Ryuuji believed that. His lips quivered with a faint smile. Since the other day, after he listened to Taiga talk about her feelings about Christmas, he felt like something was stuck in his throat. There was a lot to it, like Taiga's solitude, and his own powerlessness—he had thought about so many things without coming to any conclusion. He hadn't been able to find an answer, and he felt like he couldn't even breathe easily. He even left the house for the convenience store, looked up at the night sky to search for stars, and walked in thought for an entire hour.

But now, he could finally breathe with relief as he looked at Taiga. It was true that Taiga was standing in the depths of a solitude he could not even imagine. He still felt like he would be eternally powerless in the face of it.

But regardless of that, this year Taiga would spend time with new friends she had just met, having fun and making a commotion like this. And then, on the next day, Taiga would definitely be with everyone, including Kitamura, happily enjoying the night. Of course, he would be there, too. He hadn't given up on getting Minori to come, either.

Taiga wasn't alone—Ryuuji felt so happy and grateful about that that he stopped and stood even in this busy time to look at Taiga while she worked with everyone else to put up the tree. He even recalled the warmth in Kanou's eyes. Plus, the bachelorette (age 30) was there, too. Not all the adults had abandoned Taiga. Though they might not have protected her like parents, she had adults on her side who were really thinking about her. *What a relief*, he whispered in his mind.

Even if no one had been watching her for these past seventeen years, on Christmas Eve, everyone would be there, and on Christmas he, Yasuko, and Inko-chan would be there. They would make a mountain of a feast, and the Takasus would welcome Taiga.

No matter how cruel the world was, this year, Taiga was smiling. Taiga was also part of this sparkling, radiant, happy scene. She no longer needed to wait under a tree by herself for someone who didn't exist. That happy Christmas night she had seen in a dream would happen tomorrow with everyone making a

ruckus, being incredibly busy, and grinning enormously.

And then, on the next day, when Christmas came, they would eat a feast at the Takasus' and dash into the end of the next turbulent year. Ryuuji would undertake a great task—end of the year cleaning—as the fireworks burned. On New Year's Eve, they would watch some bad variety show late into the night together and start a tranquil new year. The whole year would be summed up in a night. The first day of the year would start with the gong on New Year's Eve, and he planned on being there for it. Yes, in just one week, it would be a new year. In this hectic time, he wouldn't let Taiga spend another moment in solitude.

At first, Ryuuji wanted to work hard so that he and Minori could spend Christmas Eve together. Even now, that was still the first priority in his eyes. Ryuuji wanted to see Minori's smile, so he kept on moving. But then, nearly as important, he wanted to make sure everyone would be brightly smiling come Christmas Eve to happily welcome Taiga.

He wanted to be smiling. He wanted Ami and the student council members, the prep committee guys, Noto, Haruta, and everyone—everyone—everyone who was here and everyone who wasn't, to be smiling.

Unless everyone was happy, unless everyone was rewarded, it wouldn't be complete. Ryuuji thought of it as like a circular relay. Someone would wish for another person's happiness, and someone would receive happiness from another, and smile. Then someone seeing that would smile. Once started, the relay would persist as long as they could continue to pass along the baton of happiness. If even one person stopped, the ring would be broken. So Ryuuji also needed to keep passing along the baton as best he could.

“Taiga! I think this probably goes over there, too!”

“Hey, hey...Ryuuji! What are you doing?! That's dangerous!”

While Taiga was being held up by another girl in order to put together parts that were high up, Ryuuji tossed a matching part at them that he had found. She tried to catch it, but lost her balance, and rising voices of rebuke came from the girls.

“I can't believe you, Takasu-kun!”

“Seriously, why couldn’t you just hand it to her like a normal person?!”

Ehee hee. He had the face of a demi-god demon that had crawled out of hell —of course, he had only been making a slight attempt at humor. His recklessness was nothing to be scared about. From the opposite side, an “Eek!” came from a boy who didn’t know what was going on, but Ryuuji was so happy he didn’t realize that he recklessly knocked the wind out of the boy.

Eventually, though a little too late, the student council came in carrying stepladders, and the efficiency of their work went way up. The parts they haphazardly started putting together according to what they could figure out finally started to slowly come together.

“Uwah, it’s huge!”

“It’s seriously giant!”

Eventually, they started to reach a point no one could get to without a stepladder. The tree was probably at least three meters tall. The patron saint of broken hearts and student council president Kitamura took on the fearful job of stooping on a stepladder that was set up to its max height. From below, his childhood friend, who knew what the tree looked like when complete, was giving him instructions.

“That’s not right.”

“Huh...”

“That’s also wrong.”

“Oh.”

Slowly, the complex protrusions came together.

The lustrous, pearly white tree not only had height, but also width that protruded out in a circle around its skirt. When put together, puzzle-like parts of the tree formed cube-shaped deformations as big as fists that seemed like places where things were supposed to be attached. Everyone surrounded the tree, stuck the ornaments into it, and went around and around to wrap the tree with the handmade ornaments, the light bulb runners, the ribbons, and the line of bells. Though they were handmade, the silver and blue decorations had been

made to fit the theme and were sure to go well with the pearl white tree. Once the large round ornaments that had come with the tree (*silver balls and gold balls!*) were hung, the tree would look even better. None of the girls made any stupid or crude jokes. (*But they're gold balls!*)

Then Taiga yelled up from below at Kitamura, who had put together the last part.

“Kitamura-kuuun! I brought this from home! It’s from my tree at home! Put this on the top!”

“Oh, hey now! Don’t throw it! Don’t! I’ll come down to get it!”

Kitamura slipped his way down the ladder and peeked into the cardboard box Taiga was holding in her hands.

“Are you sure?! You’re okay with us using something as pretty as this? How do I put this... It looks expensive.”

At his wide eyes and raised voice, Taiga happily nodded.

“It’s fine. I brought it from my parents’ house, but it was a little too big, and I can’t put it on the tree in my condo right now.”

What Kitamura pulled out with reverent hands was a star ornament even larger than Taiga’s head. It was intricately three-dimensional and transparent, allowing the hard light to go through its form. *Waah!* The girls raised their voices at how pretty it was. *Waah!* Ryuuji also casually joined in with them. While lined up next to the girls, his evil eyes glinted.

“It’s made from crystal. It’s my favorite ornament, and it’s a waste not to use it, so it’s okay. Could you put it up?”

“Okay! We’ll keep it safe as we hang it up! We’ll put your favorite ornament on the top of the tree!”

Kitamura went up the stepladder and firmly placed the star on the treetop. Checking that it was stable, he gently let go of it with both hands and poked it with his fingertip. Then, as though he accepted its stability, he nodded, shouted “Okay!” and pushed up his glasses. Ryuuji saw a smile unfurl on Taiga’s face. Their eyes met by chance, and Taiga’s face shyly crumpled. She was even

wiggling with joy. That was okay, too—she could be as shy and wiggly as she wanted.

Then they continued on.

“Extension cable, check!”

“Wall socket, check!”

“Okay, turn off the building lights!”

Following Kitamura’s voice, starting from the ones closest to the entrance, the lights went off one at a time. The gym that was already dark because of the blackout curtains, and so cold their fingers were going numb, slowly descended into total darkness.

Everyone stood without a word and looked up at the tree. Their fatigue and their prayers that everything would go well stole the voices from all of them.

“Power on.”

They heard the sound of several power switches. *Click click*. Eventually, there was light in the darkness—

It was like a vibrating current had run through Ryuuji’s neck.

Taiga’s raised eyes were radiant with delight.

A small voice came from Ami’s lips.

“...We really did it.”

Satisfied smiles bloomed all at once on the many faces bathed in the light. For a while they were in silence, and then someone started clapping. As though echoing in response, the applause grew.

“We...did it!”

“It’s! A! Success!”

“Amazing! Amazing! Isn’t it super pretty?!”

Here and there excited voices rose up. Delight and excitement, applause and cheers, and smiles filled the room. Ryuuji whistled and brought his hands enthusiastically together. Kitamura, who had come to be beside him, also put

up his right hand for a high five. *We did it!* Then they simultaneously fist pumped. He smiled so much, his dry lips cracked. Even Kitamura smiled so hard his glasses started to slip down.

The tree that glittered in the darkness was truly beautiful.

It was lit from below by a pure white light and sparkled a gorgeous pearly color. The many bulbs blinked yellow and the hanging ornaments reflected flashes of light. Taiga's ornament winked brilliantly like a real star at the top. It was as if it were lighting up the whole world with the joy of Christmas as it filled with the light and radiance of everything around it. But then...

CRASH! They heard the sound of tremendous destruction. The curtains fluttered and light from the outside invaded suddenly.

One of the girls shouted. They could hear what sounded like several people falling over in surprise. With a terrific force, like a white shadow leaping through the darkness, something barreled directly into the top of the tree. It made a horrible sound. There was a shriek. All the lights disappeared, and the gym blacked out.

The gigantic tree hadn't been fixed in place. They had just been about to move it, after all. Helped along by its own great, unsettled weight, the tree tilted and then with a terrific force, sounded as though it had fallen right on its side. They could hear the ornaments scatter and the parts that had been stuck together being blown away.

Ryuuji didn't understand what had happened. He didn't even want to see how it had ended up. One of the fragments flew by his face, and he reflexively closed his eyes.

Not a single one of them said anything.

"Th-the lights! Please, turn on the lights! Quick, quick, hurry!"

Only Kitamura's voice, which was hurried from his fluster, echoed discordantly throughout the space. The lights turned on in the opposite order they had turned off. Then the terrible spectacle became crystal clear. The expressions disappeared from all of their faces.

The tree they just put up had collapsed.

All the ornaments had scattered onto the floor, and the cable for the lights, which pulled free of the socket, was splayed out like a dead snake. Fragments of Styrofoam lay scattered around. Several parts that were necessary for holding the tree together were completely broken.

And then Taiga's star, which had been on the very top...

"Oh...no...it can't be! No way..."

Taiga ran over, kneeling down so she could reach out to it, but Ami caught her elbow. "You idiot, it's dangerous!"

After falling three meters and hitting the gym's hard floor, the star ornament made of crystal had shattered. The sharp fragments glittered cruelly, and if Taiga had touched them, they would have easily cut through her skin.

Just what had happened?

As though in answer, they could see the darkening sky beyond the blackout curtains that they had put on the windows. The outside light was coming through the glass because the window had been broken. There were glass shards scattered a slight distance from the tree. *Glad no one was under that*, Ryuuji thought, but he couldn't get the words out of his mouth.

At that point, the gym door was thrown open with a loud noise. Immediately after it, the commotion of several people's footsteps followed.

"We're so sorry! Did anyone get hurt?!"

It was the clear and reaching voice of a girl.

They turned around. Ryuuji saw her. The owner of the voice was Minori in her dirty uniform. Behind Minori, there were two girls wearing the same uniform.

"..."

At the very front, Minori's mouth closed as though she had frozen over. On the floor, all by itself, was a softball. That might have—no—that definitely had broken the window, tipped over the tree, destroyed it, and shattered Taiga's star.

Eventually Minori's lips trembled, mouthing *I'm sorry*. As she said it again and again, her lips moved over and over, but her rasping voice didn't reach anyone's

ears in a way they could hear. Time couldn't be reversed. They couldn't pretend that the stupid foul launched by the girls' softball club hadn't happened.

"Minorin, it's okay now. It was just an accident, after all. You couldn't help it."

"No... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm really truly sorry..."

All of the girls' softball club members had gathered in the gym in order to restore the tree Minori had destroyed.

"Misconduct by a leader is all of our misconduct! We're incredibly sorry!"

The athletic girls formed a line and bowed passionately, then moved under one command and secured a position in a corner, where they were now sitting cramped together in a huddle with their feet folded under themselves. They worked in silence, some taking on the challenge of putting together the broken parts of the tree with adhesive as though it were a three-dimensional puzzle. Others were pulling apart the tangled ornaments, and still others were mending the ball ornaments. Then, in the center of the gym, the prep committee and student council were putting the tree together again. Relying on the softball club to do that work when they hadn't seen the completed tree would have just taken more time, so when Minori and the other girls lowered their heads and asked to fix everything, Kitamura specifically refused that.

Away from the girls of the softball club, away from where they were putting together the tree anew, Minori was sitting under the stage. She looked up at Taiga and Ryuuji when they walked over and called out to her, and then around at the faces of the softball club members.

"Please let me do what I can... Please. Don't worry about me, Taiga. It's my fault... Ahh, ugh...I'm the worst...ugh..."

What am I doing, really? She bit her lip until it turned white.

In her hands, as she said those shameful words to herself, she gripped the broken fragments of Taiga's star and quick-dry glue. Minori was trying to restore the star, which had already been so intricate to begin with. Taiga crouched beside Minori and looked desperately into her face, which was hard and stiff.

“Minorin...you’re not to blame. At all. This was just an unfortunate accident.”

“No, this is my responsibility. I think it must have happened because my head was in the clouds. I can’t believe I hit that kind of ball... It wasn’t an accident, I made a poor hit. I made a mistake. I couldn’t focus and missed. I’m really sorry about this star... I can’t believe that out of all things, I broke something so precious to you... I can’t get it back to how it was before, but...I’m sorry. I’m sorry...for everyone...I’m so sorry.”

Minori wiped her face roughly with her uniform sleeve and hung her head. Her back slowly rose and fell with her deep breaths, but she was also faintly trembling.

Taiga looked worriedly up at Ryuuji’s face where he stood beside her, but he didn’t know what to do either when things came to this.

The time to go home drew near and the situation, to be honest, was terrible. Everyone knew that it was just an unfortunate accident and didn’t blame Minori, but that didn’t change anything. The teachers had given them strict orders to go home when the school shut down. If they weren’t finished with preparations, then the party was in jeopardy. He knew how hurt Minori must have been. She must have been flustered, and though no one blamed her, she must have really been hurting that the situation was so bad she had to involve the softball club in picking up the pieces.

It actually might have been better for Minori if someone had gotten angry, yelled at her, cried, and hit her. It must have been hard for her to be the one who had to place the blame on herself. Until she forgave herself, the circle of negativity, disgust, and blame would never end. The guilt would never disappear.

Sitting on the freezing gym floor in her uniform with her legs folded under her, Minori’s eyes turned red at the rims. She still had her face turned down as she sniffed, and it wasn’t just because of the cold that her fingertips shook.

Taiga reached out a hand to Minori, but she hesitated for a moment in the air. As though she wasn’t sure of herself, Taiga opened and closed her hand several times and suddenly got up. She looked up at Ryuuji’s face and said, “Then, Ryuuji, could you help her? Please?”

Then she pushed at Ryuuji's back.

“NO!”

When faced with Minori's high voice, Ryuuji stood stick straight. Taiga also froze. Minori's voice had echoed like a shriek.

“You can't! Please stop! Stop doing that!”

Then she continued.

With no one else coming near her, she once again turned her head down to absorb herself in the endless puzzle of fixing the star.

There was no way she would smile. There would be no happy Christmas or excitement. The heavy silence simply accumulated like snowflakes in the frozen air.

It was unclear whether they would finish preparing in time. All they knew was one thing—Minori had just one more reason not to go to the party. Ryuuji looked down at Minori and closed his slightly tired eyes. It was easy to endure the pain of his help being rejected, but just looking at Minori, who was on edge to the point she had snapped at them, was difficult.

With her mouth pinched closed, Taiga looked between Minori and Ryuuji. She nibbled a little on her knuckles and then looked at Ryuuji's face once more. Their eyes met, and Taiga jerked out her chin a little. It was almost as though she were trying to say, “I leave this to you.” With that, her hair fluttering, Taiga turned around and left them to head to the ring where they were reconstructing the tree.

Ryuuji watched her small back as she retreated. Then, unable to do anything, he stood next to Minori and stayed there like that.

“Takasu-kun, you should go, too. Okay. I'm going to work on this by myself right now.”

Minori sniffled and knit her eyebrows together as she forced a smile on her face. However, Ryuuji did not leave.

He was useless, but he had decided he wouldn't be going anywhere.

“It's okay, so just let me see. I'm good at these kinds of things.”

“Takasu-kun...”

“You don’t know what it looked like at the start. If you don’t like it, just ignore me.”

Ryuuji practically forced his way in as he sat down beside Minori. He preemptively glanced at the fragments and found two large pieces. “Right, this is it.” He immediately started putting them together with the glue. He did it properly and carefully.

“Takasu-kun, stop. Let me take responsibility for this. If you...if you help me like this then—”

“We don’t have the time. You do what you can as best you can. I’ll do what I can. I’m not helping you, I’m doing this for myself.”

For a moment, Minori’s face scrunched up like she was about to start crying, but she held out and bit her lip. As though she wasn’t able to say anything more, she dropped her gaze to the fragments in front of her eyes.

The two of them fell into silence as they absorbed themselves in putting together the fragments of crystal. There wasn’t any way they would be having a conversation. Even though he was next to the girl who took his breath away, it was cold and his heart didn’t even thump. Regardless of that, Ryuuji stayed by Minori’s side. Even if she didn’t want him there, he remained sitting next to her.

They never had any real conversations while Taiga was suspended, either. *Don’t you think Minori is avoiding you?* Taiga had said at the family restaurant while they were studying for the test. Ryuuji and Minori had only seen each other in passing for quite a while. And then right now, in these unfortunate circumstances, they were clearly separated, as if there were a fissure between them. Even though he was right next to her, his eyes and his voice didn’t reach her.

In those recent days, he really had only felt the distance between them.

But regardless of that—no, because of that, Ryuuji wanted to be beside Minori. Because she was distant, because he didn’t understand, because she wouldn’t understand. Because of that, he could only glue the pieces together. If she were avoiding him, he would go after her. If there were times they missed

each other in passing, he could try to get back to her. If the situation were terrible, he would do all in his power to recover it—like this, forcing it, even if it didn't feel natural. He would sit and be there and reach out to her distant heart.

Ryuuji thought that itself was love. Even if he were the only one reaching out, that was a given, because it was unrequited love. Even if Minori only showed him her hard profile, even if her lips were blue, even if she still seemed like she might burst out crying blaming herself, Ryuuji would still want to reach out with his powerless hands. All he wished for was that he would eventually reach her. He felt that when he stopped reaching out, that would be the end of this love.

Ryuuji picked up a fragment and then found another in the same shape. After carefully matching and gluing the pieces, he pressed them together for a while and then nodded to himself.

Because he really might have been in her way, because he really didn't want her to hate him, Ryuuji tried to keep his breathing as quiet as possible. It would be best if Minori, who was next to him right then, forgot he was even there.

But right when he thought that, Minori said Ryuuji's name in a low voice.

"Takasu-kun..."

"Yeah?"

She kept her head down and still didn't look at Ryuuji.

"Takasu-kun, Takasu-kun..."

"I'm listening."

"Takasu-kun..."

"I'm here."

Minori repeated it. She kept calling for Ryuuji.

When she did, Ryuuji replied. He didn't miss any one of her calls and answered each one. If Minori were to call him, he would always respond to her voice. If Minori were to reach her hand out to him, he would always grab it.

He gently glued on another fragment. Slowly, Taiga's broken star came back to its original shape. It wasn't the same as before it had broken, but it still

shone.



Ryuuji held up the partially put together star and let the lights from the gym go through it. He focused his eyes on the brilliant light. He looked at the star, which had been created to shine at the center of a happy Christmas, and smiled. The light was the symbol of happiness itself. He stretched out his arm so that Minori could see it too and gently said, "See. Look, isn't it pretty? You can fix it even after it's been broken. So cheer up."

"It'll never be back to what it originally was..."

"But it's shining like it's supposed to."

"I—"

Minori's voice wavered like she was sinking in water. He waited for her next words, pretending like he hadn't noticed.

"I don't know...if it'll ever be the same..."

"It will."

Ryuuji answered firmly and looked up at the shining star. This was light that emitted happiness. Minori must have seen it, too. If she couldn't believe in it, then he wanted to show it to her more decisively, more firmly. He wanted to put it out there right in front of her eyes.

No matter how badly it broke, no matter how many times it needed to be put back together, even if it broke for a cheap reason like a misunderstanding or over an assumption, even if it seemed like it had died, it would heal and put itself back together over and over, being reborn again with Minori's smile and her words. That was his love for Minori.

Even if it broke, it could be put back together.

That was why there was no reason for her to cry.

"It's fine. It'll be fixed, as many times as it needs to be."

The light held up in front of his eyes was the switch. The switch flicked on, and in the back of his cowering heart, the lights from several stars started to shine.

The Orion that winked inside of Ryuuji gave him infinite power.

He had the power to pass the baton along to Minori. He had already started

running and reached out with one hand in preparation to give it to her. Time seemed to go faster for Ryuuji. His heart beat faster, and his eyes lit up. He cast off his imminent limitations as he headed towards the bounds of his overflowing love for her.

He didn't want to just wait with his hand stretched out. He wanted to give her the baton, have her take it from him, and yell at her, *Run!* He wanted to show Minori. From the bottom of his heart, Ryuuji wanted to show Minori the limitless stars and the unbreakable things in the wide world of his heart. *That's why I want you to keep going and run this relay.*

He'd spent more than a year and a half loving Kushieda Minori. Ryuuji finally reached the point where he wanted to shout it out loud.

It took over an hour to get the tree looking like it had before. Minori and Ryuuji put Taiga's star back together, but the glued fragments still showed off its cracks. It looked almost like a mosaic ornament. Taiga smiled, though.

"This is good," she said. "It looks cuter than before."

She didn't just hug Minori but embraced her and rubbed her back several times. Minori buried her face in Taiga's hair for a moment. Then she broke away. "I'm really sorry!" she said in a loud voice towards the prep committee and student council. She lowered her head. Next, she turned to the softball club sitting in a line and said once more, "I'm sorry you have to have me as your captain!"

The girls' softball club all bowed and ran out of the gym in a display of athleticism.

Ryuuji had, without hesitation, run after Minori.

He followed her out into the chilling breeze and tapped her back. When Minori turned around as though she were surprised, he tried to say it to her as brightly as possible.

"You should come tomorrow! To the party! It'll definitely be fun! I want to spend it with you!"

“...Uh.”

Minori sounded like she was choking up.

Ryuuji didn't withdraw. “Well, if you don't have any plans... I want you to come, though!”

“...”

He waited for her to say his name one more time. He waited for a raspy voice, a faint whisper to fall from her lips.

But.

“I can't... I can't go.”

Minori didn't say his name. She stood still as she shook her head decisively. Under the dim flicker of florescent lights, he could only see that her face had turned pale.

“I caused so much trouble, I can't. I can't go.”

“But I'll wait for you!”

“Don't wait for me... I'm not going.”

“I'll wait!”

He was pushing to the point of almost being stalker-like. Without caring what all the other softball club members thought, he yelled as he faced Minori's back. Whether it was pitiful, or an embarrassment, or his face was as red as the king of the realm of the dead, his love wouldn't stop once it had started running. The switch that flipped on once could never be turned off again.

It was December twenty-fourth, four in the afternoon.

The closing ceremony ended before noon. They filled their bellies with the bento lunches they brought from home and went all out with the party prep until they reached the current point in time. The members of the student council and prep committee all gathered at the gym. They stood and watched the instructor in charge of fire inspections, who held a manual in one hand and was checking off various details. *If we don't pass at this point*—it couldn't only

have been Ryuuji whose heart was thumping a little.

“Okay, this is all good to go... Everything’s in order. There are no problems here.”

At the voice they had been waiting for, voices of relief rang out here and there.

“Yay!”

“We’re done!”

Their smiles sprang to life.

“Now everyone, take great caution to make sure there are no problems. In the one in a million chance that a student breaks the drinking or smoking rules, that’s a direct expulsion. You got that? And you, patron saint! You had better be careful about managing and supervising as the person in charge of everything.”

“Understood!” Kitamura replied to the bachelorette (age 30) Koigakubo Yuri (in the process of finding real estate) with a salute. She wore a shiny, high-quality gray pantsuit and simple white gold accessories. Her hair was prim and proper in a bun. She seemed a little more masculine than usual. Possibly because they had just finished getting permission and were in a lighter mood, the first-year girls talked to the bachelorette (age 30) casually and without restraint.

“Actually, Yuri-chan-sensei, you look super fashionable today!”

“Could it be that you’re going on a date?!”

Kyaah! A Christmas Eve date with your boyfriend! With the excited girls in the corners of their eyes, the upperclassmen remained composed. Anyone who had known her for a while would know in their bones that the thirty-year-old’s love life game couldn’t possibly be strong enough to get a date for Christmas Eve. It was still fresh in their memories that Mercury’s passage into retrograde stole her most promising partner from her. Her reply was exactly as the upperclassmen thought it would be.

“I don’t have a date. I’m going to a real estate purchasing lecture for single women. It cost one thousand five hundred yen... I’m going to buy a condo, so...”

That's just like her—Ryuuji in particular, nodded. He tried to burn the courage of the bachelorette (age 30) who had armed herself with dark brown makeup, into his memory, but then ultimately averted his eyes. It just made too strong of an impact on him.

“What?! R-real estate?”

“On Christmas Eve? Why?”

It seemed to be a truth that was too difficult for the fifteen and sixteen-year-olds to take in. They couldn't believe that someone single and in their prime would gather with others to think about real estate during Christmas Eve and pay a fee for it to boot. It seemed that it was beyond reason for them.

“The women who have dates for Christmas Eve just haven't prepared themselves yet. They're not ready for reality to shake up their lives! In other words, even though we are single, this course is tests our qualifications for jumping our first hurdle...owning real estate. Do you get it?”

“Huh...”

“Ummm...”

“I feel like interest rates have hit bottom, so I'm going now. Oh, there will be other teachers in the staff room the whole time, so make sure you go and check in with them before you start and before you end.”

Somehow or other, they returned to their earlier mood and everyone happily answered back, “Yes!” The bachelorette (age 30) might have felt some of the youth return to her heart from her students' excited voices. Her narrowed eyes relaxed. As she got up to leave, she whispered to Ryuuji with a slight smile when she passed by him.

“It's great that the tree turned out well. Your grades went up, and I'm pretty pleased. I'm sure you'll all be rewarded for the work you put into this.”

Ryuuji also grinned and returned a smile to the single homeroom teacher.

“Thank you so much! I'm sure you'll find some great property!”

“Oh...yeah...thanks...”

I'll show you—I'll be rewarded!

Ryuuji held a secret but strong determination as he looked up at the tree that even the bachelorette (age 30) praised. It was a little wobbly, but the tree standing in the center of the gym was giant, magnificent, and beautiful. It was really incredibly gorgeous. They had filed down the seams in the parts that were facing the front so no one could figure out just by looking that it collapsed once. And then at the top was Taiga's star. It was complete.

It wasn't just the tree that was complete. There were white and blue spotlights crossing through the air and lighting up the floor. If they turned off the other lights and only used those to light up the place, it would definitely be dramatic. The stool tests everyone had taken had also been worthwhile. The fruit punch, sandwich, fruit, cracker and small dessert tables were even lined up showily along the wall, though of course, carrying around and serving the refreshments was the prep committee's work. The food offered was from a catering company with a name for themselves. With Ami's connections, they had compromised to get all the rental utensils for free as long as the people who sampled the food shared their opinion of it.

In the middle of the gathered people, Kitamura's voice rang out, "Okay!"

"We had a lot of trouble getting here, but we're done with all the preparations now! Thanks for your hard work, everyone! I'm really thankful for how many people came to help out with the patron saint of broken hearts' plan! We still have some more to do, but I hope that all of you are also excited for today and enjoy yourselves fully! And Ami, thank you for making arrangements for the tree and food."

In the applause that burst out all at once, Ami's eyes went wide, and she acted flustered.

"No way," she said, "it wasn't a big deal~!"

"There it is. Dimhuahua is so...Ryuuji?"

"..."

"Hey. Are you okay?"

"Huh? Wh-what?"

At Taiga's voice, Ryuuji blinked his eyes. For her to ask if he was okay, he must

really have not looked okay. Those last few hours, he'd been putting up with nonstop physical labor.

"It's like your eyes are wandering around... I can't tell where you're looking. You're scary. What's wrong? Well, I get that you're worried about Minorin from what happened yesterday, but you have to keep yourself motivated—"

"No. It's the opposite. I'm super passionate right now. Look, the party is perfect. Everything's prepared. We just need Kushieda to come! But that's where the hurdle is, in the end. I was persistent about inviting her, but all she said was 'Sorry.'"

Taiga *hmm*-ed and folded her arms.

"If that accident just hadn't happened yesterday, it would have been easy to talk to her... No, but if you're that determined...it's okay. Don't worry, you keep being determined and passionate. Just leave everything else to me, angel Taiga-sama."

"What exactly are you planning on doing?"

Though he was motivated, it was going nowhere—Ryuuji was slightly aware of that. Taiga looked up at him and gave him a peace sign.

"Don't worry about it. It'll be fine. I still have some tricks up my sleeve."

Her whispered words disappeared for a moment in the cacophony that started up around them. Kitamura had broken them up to use their time for themselves before the party started. The ones who wanted to change would go back home, the ones who had brought their own clothes from home would change in class, and the ones who wanted to take a break would slink to the classrooms or go to some café. All of them had started walking and talking.

They wanted to begin at five in the afternoon. The plan was to start letting the attendees into the place, have Kitamura's welcome at five-thirty, and then the party would officially start! They could come late, leave early, and have fun as they liked, and the closing ceremony would be at seven-thirty. They would make sure to have everyone go home before eight, and the prep committee and student council officials would gather again at eight in the morning the next day. They would be responsible for cleaning the place up.

And so they had an hour until it started. *Well, what should I do?* Ryuuji thought. He stopped and stood, and then Kitamura poked him gently in the elbow.

“Takasu, Aisaka, what are you doing now? I still need to set up the welcome desk that the student council oversees. Maybe you could help?! If you did, I would be suuuper grateful!”

“You would? I wouldn’t mind.”

At that point, Ami’s face appeared. She rested her chin on Kitamura’s shoulder.

“You should say no. He has plenty of people. Kitamura’s pretty rude when it comes to using people for errands. He’s really good at that stuff.”

“Keep it down. What are you doing then, Ami? You want to help, too?”

“You must be joking? I’m going home. And. Getting. Changed. ♥ Well, I’ll see you when we start!”

In the hopes of following Ami’s retreating back, Taiga pulled Ryuuji’s sleeve.

“Sorry, Kitamura-kun, we’re also going home. Let’s go, Ryuuji.”

“Huh? What are we going to do at home? I’m probably going to stay in my uniform and—”

“Just go home! Walk! Hurry! Well, see you later!”

Taiga pulled Ryuuji forcefully, so he gave up and went home. What was supposed to be at home? Even when he asked, Taiga ignored his questions and wouldn’t answer. He wondered if she was okay with Santa seeing her ignore him.

Then, once they finally made it to the entrance of Taiga’s condo, Taiga said, “Once you get in, open your bedroom window immediately.”

“Why...”

“Just do it. Do exactly what I say.”

Taiga put one hand on her hip, pointed at Ryuuji’s nose with the other, and gave him a self-justified order that he didn’t understand the meaning of. As he

was thinking, *What's going on?*

"I'm home!"

"Oh. ♥ Welcome home, be-yotch~! How does your report card look~?"

He threw his grade report Yasuko's way, where she was rolled up carefreely under the kotatsu table.

"Kyaah! ☆"

Ryuuji didn't know if the shriek she gave was good or bad. Just as he had been told, he got onto his bed and faithfully opened the south-facing window. Beyond the window was Taiga's condo window, which opened up right to her bedroom.

"Here!"

"Whoa?!"

Rattle. The window across from him opened and Taiga threw a box as wide as her arms at Ryuuji. He quickly threw out his hands and caught it. It wasn't as heavy as it looked, but it still surprised him quite a bit.

"Wh-what is this?! Seriously, that's dangerous! You're just doing stuff the lazy way..."

"Open that right away. When you see it, you'll get it. Well, I'll head over in thirty minutes."

At that, the window to Taiga's room closed. She even closed her curtains and left Ryuuji alone by himself.

"What? What happened, yo? What's that?"

"Taiga kind of threw it at me... She said to open it..."

"It looks like one impressive box. I wonder if it's snacks or something?"

Facing Yasuko, Ryuuji sat down on the floor to open up the mystery box Taiga had thrown at him. The mother and son's hands grasped the box top and lifted it open at the same time.

"Oh...owaah... ☆"

“Oh...Ohh... ☆”

Their chins dropped to the same degree. Their eyes snapped wide open as they both became speechless at the same time. Yasuko and Ryuuji, Takasu genes out in full force, looked exactly alike.

Ryuuji heard the sound of the door opening and the unusual sound of high heels from the entryway. He heard footsteps continuing quickly and marching straight into the living room.

“Huh? Ryuuji? Ya-chan? Where are you?”

“Over here! At the sink!” they replied, and Taiga came back to the hallway from the living room and peeked into the door that had been left open. Then they pointed at each other.

“Ah!”

“Whoa!”

They exclaimed briefly. Yasuko, who was crouched at Ryuuji’s feet as he looked into the mirror, was wrapping up the dryer cord. Once she noticed, she also looked up at Taiga.

“Wow. ☆” She gave a shout of joy and grinned. “Looking great, looking great. You look super cute, Taiga-chan!”

She gently fixed Taiga’s fur collar. Ryuuji was robbed of the words he should have said, and his eyes glinted suspiciously and dangerously.

In thirty minutes, Taiga had transformed from a petite high school girl to a lady heading to a party. She had properly pinned her bangs to the side and put her wavy hair up tightly. The paleness of her forehead stood out, and her pitch-dark mascara increased the depth of her glittering eyes to beautifully set off her crimson lips. Delicate Taiga, who was normally comparable to a French doll, seemed to have evolved to become even more beautiful. Her light makeup made her look even more feminine and put together. The shape of her face, which already seemed as if it were sculpted, looked even deeper and stood out all the more.

She had slightly transparent stockings, and her dress was little and black—it was made from jet-black silk and created a simple, beautiful silhouette that went down to her knees. Ryuuji didn't even need to be troubled about her lacking chest because some layered draping covered it up. She wore long black gloves that were slightly shiny and had short wings on the end to make them look younger. On top of that, she was wearing a short fox fur coat. She had a clutch with black fringe beads that rustled, and her slender neck was adorned with a conspicuous pearl choker.

Taiga was exactly perfect. No matter how anyone looked at her, she was beautiful, lovely, chic, and fashionable. She was so pretty it was a waste to use this outfit at a school party. A faint and slow smile spread on the beautiful girl's lips.

“What a relief, it's the perfect size.”

On the other hand, Ryuuji was also dressed up in a way that was wasted on a school party.

The box Taiga had thrown at him had contained a black suit set. On Yasuko's advice, he had put on a necktie they had tied slightly loosely, and stylishly only closed the middle button of the jacket. Unusually for him, his bangs were smartly slicked up with hair wax. Ryuuji looked exactly like a prince—like a noble prince from the underworld. It would have been fitting to call him a young virtuoso yakuza leader or the young master of a household. Those kinds of titles would have fit him perfectly.

It was just how Ryuuji's face looked, though. The narrow-shouldered suit really was well made. It was a refined shade of black that couldn't be mistaken for mourning clothes.

“A-a-are you sure about this?! I-I-Is it really okay if I borrow it?! I-I-I-I can't stop stuttering...”

It looked so expensive. He was licking and lapping at his dry lips as he stuttered. Taiga, acting like it was nothing, shrugged her shoulders, which were wrapped in real fur.

“I'm not letting you borrow it,” she declared in a matter-of-fact tone. “I'm giving it to you.”

“You’re giving it to me?! But the lining has R. Aisaka sewn into it!”

“When I left home, I told the movers to bring everything in the closet, so they also brought this. But it’s okay. He got that as a gift from someone, but it was too big on him and fixing it was too much of a bother, so he just left it behind. If it bothers you, you can just take out the embroidery. Hide the evidence.”

“Getting hand-me-downs from that guy isn’t something I can joke about, I—”

“It’s Gucci.”

“Gu...”

“If you won’t wear it, then I’ll have to get rid of it.”

“*M-m-m-mottainai*—that’s too wasteful! Here, get the thread scissors! We’re hiding the evidence!”

Okay, okay, even Yasuko got caught up into the mix and nodded along. *Snip!* They cut the embroidery thread. He pulled it with his fingers and it slipped right out, and with that, Ryuuji had formally gotten himself a yakuza virtuoso suit. Taiga had gone out of her way to give it to him after all, and if anything, not destroying it was really *mottainai*... He told himself that. As he got carried away by the mood, he took another happy look into the mirror. An enchanting, beautiful couple stared back. ...He didn’t go so far as to think that, but, well, they looked something like that. He didn’t know what others would think, though.

Looking at him through the mirror, Taiga’s cherry-colored lips grinned.

“Now we’re really done preparing, but do you know what the most important thing is? You’ll wear that tonight since you have something you need to do. I won’t get in your way at all today, okay? Anyway, trust me and don’t worry. And, this is the only day I’ll say this to you, but today, Takasu Ryuuji, you kind of look cooler than usual... You’ve got some charm. So make sure you’re dignified and stand up straight. Raise your head high.”

You look pretty good yourself tonight, too.

...But he wasn’t able to say that. His lips trembled, and he suddenly couldn’t see Taiga’s face properly. Even after she said that, he wanted to lower his head.

Don't go getting shy, you idiot, he grumbled low at the back of his throat. Knowing that Ryuuji felt embarrassed, Taiga started giggling.

“Hee hee.”

He knew what he needed to do.

He would enjoy this Christmas Eve and make sure that everyone would be rewarded and would see the next day with a smile. He would make sure the happiness relay was completed without anyone missing out. He hadn't given up on Minori. He would send her a message. He would call her. If Taiga said she had a plan, he would believe in the angel. He might even be able to use the blessing from the patron saint of broken hearts.

He gripped his hands into fists in front of the shabby sink.

“Okay!”

He pumped himself up once again. Taiga might have been thinking of Kitamura's face or of her dream with Santa, but the light in her eyes grew stronger.

“Oh, I know. ☆ Ehee hee, I'll use some adult magic on you two~!” Seeing the two of them like that, Yasuko broke out into a smile and hummed as she skipped out of the small bathroom. She went into her own room and came back with a small purple bottle and an old leather case grasped in her hands.

“Pardon me~!”

“Waah!”

She sprayed liquid from the small bottle onto her fingertips and waved her hands in the air several times before slowly pushing them right into the bust of Taiga's dress. Ryuuji was so startled he couldn't make a sound as, in front of his eyes, his mother's hands went through the area between Taiga's chest, which was like a void continent. She did it twice. After a while, he sensed something soft and mysteriously warm. It was a gentle smell coming to his nose.

“Hee hee, that was perfume just now. ☆ It's a little stronger than a toilette, but when you put a little on your stomach or your chest or anywhere that's warm, you can't go wrong. ☆”

“Th-thank you... Wow, it’s, like, a really good smell...wearing real perfume is like really being an adult!”

Far from being adult-like, Taiga twitched her nose like a beast and looked up at Yasuko with a smile. Yasuko also seemed happy.

“It should mix with your own smell, and when the party starts, you’ll get a really sliight fragrance coming from you! So, Ryuu-chan, I’ll let you borrow this~! Open sesame~!”

She opened the case and showed it to Ryuuji. Inside was a domestic maker’s dignified men’s watch. It wasn’t gaudy, but it was solid, and there was no rust or dirt to be seen on it. The second hand kept perfect time. Though it looked old, it had been properly taken care of. *Huh*. Ryuuji was led to think of a certain possibility.

“Could this be... Is this my dad’s?”

“Not even close, yo. ☆”

Yasuko easily broke apart her son’s romantic notion and gave him an easygoing grin.

“A really long time ago, when I ran away from home, I ran away with everything that had value that I could carry. Like kimono and obi ornaments with jewels in them, and rings. I went around grabbing everything that glittered. I also grabbed this when I did that, but the pawnshop said that it wouldn’t really get me a lot of money, so I didn’t really want to sell it. I had it left over until now.”

“Wh-what about everything else...”

“It aaaalll disappeared and transformed into money before your third birthday. ☆”

At the mother’s overly difficult life, the children were immediately speechless.

“It really would have been nice if we had your dad’s Rolex, though. I’m sure it would have looked great on you. It had diamonds on it and was all dazzling, too...” Yasuko told them as she put the watch on Ryuuji’s wrist. The size was perfect, and the stainless steel was surprisingly cool. It was enough to make his

heart jump.

“In other words, this is my grandfather’s... Actually...wait, isn’t it stolen?!”

“That’s exactly right~! Wow! It looks perfect on you, Ryuu-chan! It looks great~! Ahh, I’m glad I didn’t sell it off for dirt cheap! I was really split about it on that day.”

He didn’t know what day that day was, but Ryuuji was silent for a bit. When he calmed down and returned to his senses, he looked down. The things he was currently wearing were Taiga’s detestable father’s suit that she’d walked off with, and his grandfather’s watch that Yasuko stole as she ran away from home.

He kind of felt like his whole body was decked out with things of dubious origin—if “someone” really was watching, this might earn him divine retribution. Feeling like that, his spine automatically quivered. He even remembered something terrible.

“Dads don’t get rewarded.”

It was the ominous one-liner Ami had gifted him with. In the suit and in the watch were the foolishness, regret, and deep grudges of the fathers who had left behind their daughters and not been able to take care of them. What if the items were cursed?

No way.

No, stop. It wasn’t right to think about things like grudges and curses when Christmas Eve had finally come.

It was December twenty-fourth and just a little before five.

For Taiga’s sake, since she was in heels, Yasuko called a taxi driven by one of her regulars to the front of the Takasu house.

They got into the taxi, which was luxurious considering they were high schoolers, and told the driver their destination.

“Oh, is this a date?!” joked the old man, whom Ryuuji recognized, and then the two of them answered back at once.

“No!”

In the butt pocket of Ryuuji’s suit, which sunk into the cushions, Ryuuji had securely stored a present that he had prepared to give to Minori.

Then, night came for the streets.

The Christmas lights shone like a glittering flood.

His heart beat faster.

His hopes and worries closed in on him in turn.

Ryuuji nervously fumbled with his necktie. Grabbing his sleeve to stop him, Taiga told him in a low voice, “I told you that it’d be okay.” Her voice hinted at a smile.

The yakuza virtuoso in his Gucci suit and the lady who was still petite in her nine-centimeter heels rode in the taxi that was now like a magic carriage. It bore the two of them, different from their usual selves, down the glittering streets of Christmas Eve at forty kilometers per hour in the brilliant world that was also out of the ordinary.

Chapter 5

“It’s already crowded even though we came early! Just how many people are coming?! Oh, Takasu, spotted you!”

“Oi, Taka-chaaan! Over here!”

It was a quarter after five.

The tree shone in the center of everything, and the blackout curtains were pulled shut. The gym, decorated in lights and illumination displays, was filled with the confusion of the boisterous students. It may have been because the Christmas party was a departure from their everyday lives, but the room was filled with the feeling of festivity, and everyone was already getting caught up in the mood. There were some people wearing the glittery pointed hats that had been distributed at the welcome table, others wearing pince-nez glasses, and then even others wearing smart suits.

“Ah, be careful! Don’t spill anything! If it gets tacky, the dirt will stick to it, too!”

One of them had donned a handkerchief and an apron in their evolution into an old lady manning a restaurant. *You’re scaaary...* The student shrugged at their scolding. That guy had definitely been in the wrong, though. Even though the place was so congested, he was holding a cup brimming with fruit punch in an unsteady hand, and the carbonated juice still seemed to be on the verge of spilling onto the floor.

Pushing aside the packed together people as if swimming freestyle between waves, Noto and Haruta drew closer to the suit and handkerchief-wearing old lady. When the old lady—Ryuuji—noticed them, he also exclaimed, “Yo!” and donned his trump-card of a cursed ogre mask. No, wait, he was just smiling.

“What are you doing, Taka-chan? We finally get out of our uniforms and you dress up in an apron?! Actually, I had no idea you owned such a slick suit! I wish I had one of those! All I’ve got is this thing I bought at the train station just now.”

Haruta fiddled and pinched at the hem of his T-shirt fabric suit.

“That’s not bad, Haruta. At least it’s new. Look at mine. I’ve been wearing this for two years straight.”

Noto was wearing a worn-out hoodie with the name of some small-time band written in large letters. *You all could have told me you were dressing up*, his large, sad, otter-eyes said as they teared up. Incidentally, he was as cute as cat dung.

Just then, cold voices jumped on the two pitiful guys from behind them.

“Heeey! There’s a line for the fruit punch!”

“No cutting!”

Though it was hard to tell because of the crowd, Haruta and Noto had carelessly cut to the front of the line.

Oh, crap, Ryuuji thought. His eyes glinting, he sharply waved around a ladle. Like magic, the line he traced with the ladle severed through reality to spectacularly separate Noto and Haruta from the rest of the procession—in short, he made them move slightly to the side. There were few better at wielding a ladle than Ryuuji.

“Sooowrry,” Haruta said as he held back his long hair and bowed to the people that made up the line. Noto’s glasses were clouding from the stuffy heat.

“Oh, what have we got here?!”

After discovering a group of girls wearing cheongsam dresses, he carefully wiped the lenses of his glasses with his fingers.

The young noble of the underworld, who rode into the party by way of a magic horse drawn carriage, was currently emitting a strange aura from his post along the wall as the master of the fruit punch station.

Speaking of which, Ryuuji hadn’t taken on this simple job by choice. When he and Taiga arrived in their car together, the other students who were already gathered at the party showered them in heated stares. It wasn’t just their imaginations either. A few of them were just part of the Taiga-mania and joined

in with a “That’s our Tiger-san. Those high heels are dangerous weapons...” However, no matter how fashionable, beautiful, or cute either of them looked, the envious stares seemed to shine a spotlight on every embarrassing thing about them.

As those in their surroundings took notice of them, the two walked slowly together, matching step, to where the tree sparkled in the middle. Then, unintentionally, Ryuuji’s gaze was drawn to the wall. That was his mistake. He couldn’t take his eyes off it. Syrup was dripping off the ladle, cracker crumbs were dribbled over the tablecloth where they had been opened, and the people in charge of the food were chitchatting away.

“Ah, I knew it’d get cold in here.”

“But we’ve got pretty good attendance.”

Right then, one side of Ryuuji’s face started to twitch. His right hand fruitlessly grabbed at the pocket of his uniform until he remembered that he was in a suit that day. That’s right—he didn’t have the Takasu stick today. He had brought tissues and a handkerchief but no wet wipes. He also didn’t have his set of cleaning sprays. He didn’t have his just-in-case stain remover or his microfiber cloth. He didn’t have the favorite all-purpose sponge that he knitted from acrylic yarn, either. He didn’t even have his citric acid cleaning spray. Getting his hands on his antibacterial gel, deodorizing spray, or even regular soap was out of the question. He was naked. This was as good as being buck naked.

Feeling like a soldier stripped of his equipment, Ryuuji started to run in desperation. “Let me throooooough! I’ll do it! Let me do this! I’ll do it so no one makes a mess!” Just like that, in his buck-naked state, Ryuuji had exposed the abnormal tendencies that he normally kept hidden. Taiga had disappeared out of exasperation, and before he knew it...

“But Takasu, are you going to be doing that the whole entire time? That doesn’t really seem fair to you.”

“No, not the entire time... I-I think...”

He could only tilt his head at Noto’s words when his friend came back. Noto had gone to the end of the line and waited for his turn. Ryuuji filled Noto’s cup with the bubbling punch and looked around, once again questioning what he

was even doing.

He still had a little time before the party started at five-thirty. Nevertheless, a gaggle of students had already gathered in the gym, and it was more crowded than he could have ever imagined. As expected, there weren't many third years, who were still waiting to take their exams, but there were all kinds of students around, from those in their uniforms to students trying to outcompete each other with their street clothes. There were even a group of guys taking the party as an opportunity for a joke by cross-dressing, and some people were in kigurumi ranging from animals to copyrighted characters. There was also a couple getting clingy with each other and getting called out by the cross-dressers.

"Get a room!"

"Whoa?! What the heck is going on over there?!"

"Oh, that's the 'Ami-chan Club.' Supposedly they've been acting pretty reckless recently. They're kind of extreme..."

A group of a dozen or so guys had appeared at the entrance, taking a knee with faithful expressions on their faces. They were all wearing long, matching happi coats with fluorescent and glittery yellow lettering that danced on their backs and spelled out unsettling phrases like "Ami-sama is life" and "My heart for Ami-sama." They even wore headbands.

"Whoa, I'm so excited...GAAAH!"

Despite scaring a group of innocent girls who had come in after checking in with the welcome desk, none of the guys' expressions changed. Haruta slurped down his fruit punch.

"They're going to wait like that until Ami-chan gets here! They're walking on thin ice, ha ha ha!"

He laughed at them from a distance. However, Haruta had a camera hanging conspicuously from his chest with an abnormally long telephoto lens that looked just as suspicious as those guys.

"So, Haruta... What kind of pictures are you planning to take with that thing?"

As a member of the prep committee managing the party, it was hard for Ryuuji to overlook anything. The idiot, however, put up a proud peace sign and happily said, “Oh, you noticed?!”

“I’m taking pictures of Ami-chan~! Don’t you think I’ve got the right idea~?! I’m sure Ami-chan’s going to dress up in some unthinkable outfit again in front of us, all wiggly and jiggly and stuff! That’s why I borrowed this special thing! AaaHAHAHAHAhahaHAHAhahahahaha~!”

As Haruta grinned with his wide-open mouth, a trail of fruit punch dribbled down his chin like drool. He didn’t seem like he had noticed even in the slightest. Then suddenly, the idiot’s face snapped to attention as though he had resolved himself.

“I want to memorialize, not memorize Ami-chan’s glutinous maximums!”

...*You mean her gluteus maximus*, Noto said, following him up in a slightly sad tone. Ryuuji forgot to be angry and gently wiped the mouth of his not-completely-there friend.

“Huh, what?! Hey, what are you, my mom?! That’s gross!”

Haruta pushed aside Ryuuji’s hand more roughly than he had expected. Ryuuji felt raw and hurt to an extent that even surprised him. *It’s all right*, Noto muttered as he patted Ryuuji’s shoulder, but his attention was on their busy surroundings rather than Ryuuji’s teary eyes.

“So speaking of which, where is Ami-chan, anyway? Isn’t the party starting soon? I know I spotted Kihara and Nanako-sama.”

“Oooh! Kihara’s got on those short pants that show off her legs! She definitely wants us to go over there! That’s so sexy~! On the other hand, Nanako-sama has a princessy dress that’s got a pure look going for her! She’s definitely inviting us in, too! That’s just so sexy~!”

The idiot’s words passed in through one of Ryuuji’s ears and out the other in an instant. Now that Haruta mentioned it, he hadn’t seen Ami, either. That show-off might just have been taking her time dolling herself up. She was probably planning on making another grand entrance in outrageous clothes like the time she emceed the Miss Festival contest. That, or she might have been

purposefully arriving late to monopolize attention. *Hmph! As I, Ami-chan, walk, grovel in my wake, inhale the aroma of my feet as you lick the tracks of an absolute beauty whose very presence brings you to cry tears of joy. Get out of my way, you inferior plebes! Yee haw!* He hated it because she might actually do it.

However...

In actuality, the person he had been searching for this whole time hadn't been Ami.

Even while stirring the fruit punch, even while cleaning up the table, even while chatting with Noto and Haruta, the person he had not forgotten to wait for, even for a moment, was none other than Kushieda Minori.

Ryuuji looked restlessly around the busy gymnasium, which was crowded with students. He gently felt the small package in his back pocket.

There was still no reply to the message he sent earlier. He had tried calling, but it went straight to voicemail, and he hadn't gotten an answer back. He realized he didn't see "It'll be okay, so just leave it to me" Taiga, who'd puffed out her flat chest when she told him that earlier.

She still wasn't there.

Maybe he should have been saying "of course" she wasn't there. He invited her to the party so many times but hadn't changed her mind.

Maybe in the end she'll never change her mind and just won't come, he thought. *No, stop.* Ryuuji shook his head back and forth, as though he were forcefully driving away the pathetic thoughts. Didn't he want to show it to Minori? Didn't he want to give it to her? What good was there in not believing in himself? And, right, the party still hadn't even started. Everything was just beginning. Ryuuji gripped the ladle and raised his head.

That was exactly when it happened.

"Uh, excuse me, everyone! Thank you for coming to today's Christmas Eve party. We're so, sooo incredibly grateful to have you here!"

Kitamura's microphone made his voice echo through the venue. Ryuuji, Noto,

Haruta, and everyone at the party all turned together to face the stage and sputtered at the same time. *Bwaha!* They were simply dumbfounded. Their jaws hung open at the gallantry of the student council president, who was acting as the emcee for the night's party.

"Please get the party crackers you got from the welcome desk ready! In celebration of this one and only Christmas Eve, I'd like to start the party with a countdown!"

Kitamura, who was happily smiling on top of the stage, had decided to dress as a nudist Santa Claus. He was dressed in a fake beard and a run-of-the-mill red hat, black boots, red pants, and suspenders that just barely concealed his nipples. Other than that, he was utterly and completely stark freakin' naked. His upper half was in the buff.

Why? Why would he do that? With no one questioning him, Kitamura progressed onwards with the party. Though no one had asked for it, his skin was exposed and breaking out in goosebumps. His bare chest, which was even burlier than expected, was in full view. *If only that were Ami-chan right now...* Haruta muttered dopily and feebly took a picture of the nudey Santa.

"Is everyone ready?! Well then, let's celebrate this year's Christmas Eve! 3... 2..."

Ryuuji quickly managed to grab the party cracker he had left next to him. Everyone in the venue pointed the crackers that had been distributed to each person by the welcome desk upward. Then at the same time Kitamura yelled...

"...1...Merryyyyyyyyyyyy Christmaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaas!!"

Several people quipped, *Christmas Eve isn't even over yet!* Their voices were washed away by the terrific explosions. *Pop! Pop!* They shouted in high-pitched glee. Shining, sparkling confetti burst forth all at once from the hundred simultaneously bursting crackers, fluttering and twirling around in the bright beams of light. The venue was instantly adorned in a vivid storm of color. Two more pops sounded from someone who was late, and laughter bloomed around them.

The smell of gunpowder drifted through the air. Then the last lights left on near the entrance turned off, so only a bright spotlight shone from above. The

tail end of someone's whistle echoed. Fierce laughter and cheers rose up that rang in Ryuuji's ears.

"Yaaay! Merryyyy Christmaaas! Can't wait until next year, too!"

"Merry Christmas, Happy New Year~! Uh-aaahaaaa!"

He, Noto, and Haruta high-fived. "Right! Merry Christmas—Eve!" Ryuuji finished off the too-sweet punch he had poured himself.

The carbonation bubbled in his throat. The concentrated sweetness enveloped his tongue. To be honest though, Ryuuji wasn't actually passionate enough to get his heart moving yet. She still hadn't arrived. If Minori didn't come, he couldn't see the goal—he couldn't see the love—that he had been rushing towards.

His pounding heart, his stiff, trembling spine, and the rest of his body—his whole body—was just waiting for her to appear. Ryuuji's entire being was waiting for Minori's smile. He was dedicating his whole self toward praying with all his might, thinking, *Please somehow come. Please smile for me.* He was reaching out to her phantom hand, pleading with her to grab the phantom baton.

That was when it happened.

As Kitamura, who was incredibly unbearable to watch, left the stage, the curtains rose smoothly. Even more cheers climbed from all around and stacked on top of each other. They burst out madly with surprise and excitement. Ryuuji's eyes also went wide. It wasn't that he had found his father's mortal enemy whom he needed to enact vengeance against. He wasn't tightly gripping his piece, either—it was just the ladle.

He had been thinking it was weird that they didn't have background music. Of course, he knew that they would be starting the celebration with the crackers (Ryuuji was the one who arranged for them), and he just thought they would do the conventional thing and start playing music to get into the starting mood.

But he had been fooled. He had been perfectly fooled.

Next to him, a first year from the prep committee who had been distributing small sandwiches gaped vacantly. He also must not have known. If it was even a

surprise to the prep committee, that meant the student council and those guys must have been the only ones who knew about it.

They had secretly set up a special stage for the performance for just that night. The raw sounds of unfamiliar drumming started up and made his stomach tremble. The vibrations that came from his feet tickled and rushed through his body. It shook all the blood that flowed through him.

There was a drum, a guitar, a bass, and a keyboard. He was pretty sure they were a band that formed to play light music. He remembered there were students who'd watched them live at the culture festival and said they were pretty good. They played a tired Christmas pop arrangement on their instruments. Then, accompanied by the band, at the mic stand singing in English was...

"I-Isn't that...Taiga!"

Ryuuji was already on the verge of fainting.

...Taiga in a strapless black dress. Then, in the same black dress that cut off above her knees, with her hair in the same shape and form as Taiga's, was Ami. Next to them was a second-year student council girl, and one other girl, who he thought was probably the vocals to the light music group.

The four chicly dressed girls all had their bangs swept to the side in the same hairstyle. They wore deep red lipstick, gloves that went to their elbows, and black dresses that showed off their shoulders. They were layering their voices with the performance. They stood in front of standing mics, stepping to the left and right. They raised their arms, tilted their heads up slightly, and slowly lowered their arms starting from their elbows. All of their choreography was perfectly in sync, and their voices were in faint harmony.



The lights mixed together to illuminate the four. People in the venue started clapping in unison. He even heard some people start singing a measure of the song with them. There were smiling faces, people chattering, the Christmas song, and the bright light that illuminated them.

“...This is amazing. Tiger is...singing and dancing...”

Haruta forgot to take a picture as he started dancing slightly to the rhythm with his mouth still half-open. Noto answered him in a hushed voice, clapping and whistling.

“This is the power of love—it’s love. I wonder what’s so good about a guy who goes around naked...right?”

Though Noto glanced at him, Ryuuji couldn’t find the words to reply. He looked at Taiga and Ami up on the stage, and all he could think was, *What is this?*

Seriously, what is this?

He hadn’t noticed any of it. When did they practice this between the turbulent waves of studying for exams and prepping for the party? When were they able to put together such an amazing Christmas band?

The songstresses in their black dresses put their hands on their hips, shook their heads, and stepped lightly. The people gathered around the tree at the center also stepped with the music in the same way. It seemed even the show-off queen, Ami, was fine with being one in a set of girls that night. She didn’t make any grandstanding moves, but made it through the whole routine next to Taiga, her natural enemy, in step with everyone else with her ivory white shoulders glowing and moving rhythmically.

Eventually, glittering gold and silver confetti started fluttering down into the venue. Using the air current from the heater, the student council was diligently and steadily throwing the confetti a handful at a time from the second-floor passageway. Conveniently, the handmade confetti rode on the air and fluttered up. *It’s so pretty! It’s like snow!* Ryuuji heard the girls’ excited voices start up all at once.

As the shimmering snow came down, the tree was a silent symbol reflecting

the lights. It seemed as though it were lighting up the many groups of smiling people. Ryuuji couldn't see any vestige of the damage it sustained from his wall-side booth. The small blinking bulbs, the bell strands he made with Ami, the blue and silver ornaments, the shiny gold balls, all glimmered in the crossing spotlight so much it nearly blinded him.

At the top, Taiga's star twinkled. It reflected the light beautifully. It was sparkling like it was supposed to.

How fun this was.

This is the best, he thought.

Stupefied with amazement, Ryuuji looked up at the stage. There were the beautiful Christmas ornaments, the glittering lights, the giant tree, the live music, and Taiga singing. Ami dancing. Kitamura naked. His frolicking friends. And then there were a lot—really an amazing number—of smiles. The giant bustling affair at the end of the year made his ears feel weird and ring.

He really thought that he was an idiot to have thought somewhere in his heart, for even a moment, that he shouldn't have come...that he shouldn't have volunteered for the prep committee. He believed, sincerely, that he had been an idiot to think that he should have skipped the party, invited Minori somewhere else in her glum mood, and given her the present.

How could he have when the party was this fun?

Wasn't that exactly the reason why he wanted Minori to come to this exciting place, to this exciting time?

Didn't he want her to look up with him at Taiga and Ami's surprise performance? Didn't he want her to look up at the glittering tree, be lit up by Taiga's radiant star, and have fun together at the happy party?

Ryuuji put down the punch bowl's ladle and wished once more in his heart. *Kushieda, please, somehow, come quick. Please come before the party ends. Everyone is having fun, everyone is smiling, and if you don't, there just wouldn't be a reward. If you're not here, we can't finish our relay of happiness. I want to smile with you in this place, which I'm not exaggerating when I say is the best place on earth.*

There was no other place. There was no other time. He only wanted to be with Minori on this night, during the best party ever, because this night existed for Minori's smile.

Right then, on top of the stage, Taiga noticed Ryuuji's stare. Still locking gazes, Taiga smiled at him. It was as though she were trying to say *Weren't you surprised? Isn't this amazing?* Then, she turned her back to him. After three beats, she turned around. At that moment, Taiga gave him a small wink. She did it quickly, so no one would notice. It was aimed only at Ryuuji.

"Th-that idiot!"

He was bewildered, but a wry smile appeared on his face. *Don't come to me when you make a mistake getting ahead of yourself because you're a klutz.* But even though Taiga was Taiga, she didn't make a mistake with the choreography. The four, with the exact same timing, tilted the standing mics to the same degree, kicked the poles, and quickly put them back. It seemed the angel Taiga-sama who had boasted, *I'll definitely make sure Minori comes. Don't worry about it,* really did have much more up her sleeve. Wasn't this practically a miracle?

"Takasu-kuuun! Please give me punch!"

"Me first! I'm thirsty!"

It seemed there was a group swarming the booth and asking for sustenance after getting too excited too quickly. Ryuuji quickly returned to himself and remembered he was part of the prep committee. "Okay, okay, form a line!" He waved the ladle. Like he'd let even one droplet spill! His eyes hardened with desperate preparation.

The ones singing, the ones dancing, the ones talking, the ones who just wanted to make a big fuss, the one waiting for someone—each one of them had burst into smiles as the party continued deeper into the night. Kitamura came by and told him why he was dressed up the way he was. He had actually prepared a real Santa costume, but right at the last minute, when he tried to change, he noticed the top was missing. He didn't have time to prepare anything else to wear, so he ended up having to wear it. That was what Kitamura claimed, anyway.

“Couldn’t you have just worn a T-shirt, at least?”

“Oh, right! I could have done that! You could have told me that sooner!”

“...Can’t you just put one on now?”

“Hm?! What?! I can’t hear you!”

Then, when Ryuuji noticed that Taiga had disappeared, the background music had changed to trendy western songs, and the curtain was decisively down on the stage.

“So you were here all along!”

Someone suddenly took hold of Ryuuji’s arm from behind, and he staggered.

“Yeah! What is it with you? You surprised me.”

“Huh, I can’t hear you! It’s like really crowded in here...kyah!”

It’s Ami-chan, Ami-chan, Ami-chan! Ami-chan has appeared on earth! Like insects attracted by a deadly light, they could see guys paddling through the waves of people all around to approach her. The Ami-sama-love, happi-coat-wearing brigade bravely volunteered themselves to surround Ami.

“Don’t touch her!”

“Don’t approach her!”

If they hadn’t been fending off the groups of people around her, the two of them would have been sandwiched by the crowd and probably would have suffocated.

Somehow, they got a spot in front of the tree, and Ami held a hand up to her ear in the noise. She smiled with her deep, rosy, glossy lips.

“Hey, what did you think about the song?! Weren’t you surprised?!”

“Yeah, it was a big surprise! When did you even find time to practice that?!”

“It was kind of a surprise present for the whole prep committee! ♥”

They were right in the middle of the music and noise, so they couldn’t have a proper conversation without raising their voices. Dressed up even more

beautifully than anyone else in her tight black dress, Ami raised her hands up high and danced with the music directly under the lights. “Oh, I love this song~!” In the sparkling confetti, the whistles and cheers started up. The people around Ami also put up their hands like her and waved with the rhythm of the song.

“This is my song! Look, Takasu-kun, give me your hands! Hey, what’s going on with you today?! It was a pretty big surprise when you arrived in this cool suit!”

She came close enough to him that he could feel her body heat, grabbed his hands, and put them up. He felt the gazes of jealousy and envy prickling and stabbing at his back.

“W-wait a second! I’m looking for Taiga right now!”

“Huh?! What?!”

This wasn’t the time for Ryuuji to be dancing carefree. Then, breaking through the dancing people by making cutting motions with his hands, Kitamura, who was now wearing a T-shirt without the beard and hat, had appeared.

“Excuse me from the back!” he said. “Excuse me!”

“Yo, Kitamura! I’m over here! Was she over there?!”

“No, she wasn’t! Looks like no one’s seen her! Oh great, right on time, Ami have you seen her?! No one knows where Aisaka is! We’ve been looking for her for a while!”

“...”

He felt like Ami’s crimson lips faintly moved as she stopped dancing. However, the people around them were terrifically enthusiastic and crowding in, so her words didn’t reach Ryuuji’s ears.

“Huh?! What did you say?! I couldn’t hear!”

He brought his ear closer to Ami, who was pretty much the same height as him. Ami brought her body close, so that they were practically hugging, and covered Ryuuji’s ear and her lips with her hands. Then she said it.

“Like I said, she went home.”

That was it.

“She said she’d go by Minori-chan’s house. She wanted to bring her over here. Then she said she’d go home after that. She said she didn’t want to get in the way and that she was going to get ready for her beloved Christmas and wait for Santa to come or something.”

Like an idiot, Ryuuji opened his mouth and looked back at Ami’s face. Ami’s large eyes reflected a strong and cold light directly at him. Then she continued, “You didn’t know? You didn’t notice? Really?”

He nodded.

The dance music continued. In the middle of the groups of people who swayed with their hands in the air, Ryuuji could only nod. He stood stock-still. But wasn’t it strange? When Kitamura asked him “What’s wrong?” Ryuuji looked into Kitamura’s face and thought it again.

Isn’t that strange?

“Why? Why would she do that?!”

“Why are you asking me?!”

“Why did she have to go home?!”

“I said I don’t know! Maybe there’s something she doesn’t want to see?!”

“Huh...?”

“That’s why I warned you—ahh, it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter what I say to you. You’re not listening to what I say anyway. Every last one of you... I don’t care anymore.”

As though she were writhing, Ami pushed forcefully at Ryuuji’s chest with her hands. Ryuuji lost to her strength, and his legs stumbled from shock. Ami didn’t even look back at his face.

“I’m tired, so I’m blowing this joint. Get out of my way! Make a path! No way, it’s so crowded...and noisy! I want to be alone! I’m tired!”

Like that, she wrenched herself away from him and staggered off.

“What’s wrong, Ami-chan?!”

“Where are you going, Ami-chan?!”

“Let’s dance together!”

Why don’t you get out of my way! Ami yelled as she ran from the arms of those who approached her. The pale nape of her neck and her back disappeared into the ring of dancing people. Her voice also disappeared as it was buried by the music.

Ryuuji was left alone.

“What did she say?!” Kitamura said. “Did Ami know something?!”

“She said she went home...”

“Sorry, I can’t hear you, say it again!”

“She! Said! Taiga! Went home!”

“What?! Why?! But Aisaka hasn’t gotten to do anything fun yet!”

That was true—it really was true. Ryuuji looked back at his wide-eyed best friend and held his chest, which smarted from Ami hitting him.

Taiga still hadn’t had any fun at all at the Christmas Eve party. She hadn’t even been able to have a worthwhile conversation with Kitamura. The party was a success. Everyone was having fun. Everyone was smiling. But Taiga still hadn’t been rewarded at all.

“I wonder what happened?! It couldn’t be that she got sick because she got tired?!”

“Well...I don’t know...”

He didn’t know.

Ryuuji was rooted to the spot in the middle of the groups of people as it became even more crowded. He scratched his head. He couldn’t even move. He didn’t know. Why had it ended up like this?

Taiga prepared the suit for Ryuuji.

For everyone’s sake, in order to make the party more exciting, she wore a pretty costume, sang, and danced.

And then again, for Ryuuji's sake, she went and left the party? In order to get Minori? In order to not be in the way?

"Who's going to make you smile now that you've gone home by yourself? Is that how you're going to be part of the happy scene?"

As he muttered to himself, the Christmas tree sparkled in the corner of his eye. Even Taiga's star, which had been broken, winked and glittered. But no matter how pretty it was, no matter how brilliant it was, Ryuuji thought it was meaningless unless she was there. If they weren't laughing together under that bright tree, they weren't actually being rewarded. For whose sake was this night so beautiful? For whose sake was Christmas coming? Wasn't it for everyone? Wasn't it for everyone, Taiga included? *Did you forget your own words when you said everyone needs to be happy, you klutz of a tiger?*

Or—maybe she really did believe Santa was watching? She knew she was a hypocrite and doing it all for herself. Even while saying that, maybe she believed that if she was a good girl Santa really would reappear in front of her eyes again.

But Santa didn't exist. No matter how good of a girl Taiga was, no one knew it. No one was watching. There was no god in this world. The streets would be brightly lit and glittering with lights, they would be overflowing with smiles, a happy Christmas would grace the world, and Taiga wouldn't be rewarded.

Wasn't Taiga alone this year? Hadn't she gone home alone? Was there an adult there for her? Yeah, there were, but those adults wouldn't be by Taiga's side right now.

In the end, Taiga ended up alone once again this year.

He rubbed his face.

As he thought, he remained planted to the ground.

What did he need to do to stop this night's relay from breaking?

He looked at Kitamura's face. He squeezed his voice out of his throat—no, he swallowed what he was about to say. He finally realized it.

There was one person who had been watching.

And there was one person who knew about Taiga's loneliness.

There was just one person who had been watching Taiga from close by the whole time. The person who should have handed the baton to Taiga was right there. It was right in his hand.

There was only one person in the entire world who knew that Taiga had been a good girl. That person's name was Takasu Ryuuji.

Really? Is that really true? Her best friend had said over and over.

That's right. At the time, Taiga had nodded perseveringly and firmly.

"Minorin, Ryuuji said he definitely won't go home until you come. He even said he's ready to stay overnight at the school."

The words she said over and over again were basically close to a threat. She was at the front entrance of the Kushiedas' home, which she hadn't visited for a while. Minori seemed troubled as she stood still for some time and bit her lip.

Taiga remembered Minori's expression.

"Sorry, Minorin..."

Though there was no way Minori could have heard, she still quietly whispered it.

"But, it's not like you didn't want that? You must actually want to go. I know that. I'm your best friend. If I weren't, I wouldn't have worked so hard."

She had told Minori all of that, after all. Minori would definitely head to the party. It was okay if she only went just because she didn't want Ryuuji to stay overnight at school. It was fine because *he* would work hard after that.

The stockings she had removed and tossed aside hung off the sofa. Her clutch bag sat underneath them, and her short fur coat hung at the entryway. She was incredibly tired, and she didn't even have the strength to take off her dress, so she wrapped her cold shoulders in Ryuuji's scarf. She hadn't stolen it by force like usual. That day, when she sneezed as they were going home to change, Ryuuji wrapped it around her. She went right back into hectically preparing for the party, so she forgot to return it.

She buried her nose in the softness of the cashmere and fully breathed in the familiar scent. She breathed out and pushed the warmth from her own breath back onto her face.

Her heels hurt terribly from blisters, and she was reluctant to even stand up anymore. She was sitting sloppily on the rug with the living room lights turned down. She didn't turn on the TV, and the large room seemed as quiet as the bottom of a body of water.

Taiga had a small, glass tree on her low table. She gently pulled out the candle that was inside of it and very carefully lit it with a lighter she bought at the convenience store. She did it carefully—ever so carefully—since dying in a house fire on Christmas Eve wasn't a joking matter.

In her living room, where the lights were dimmed, the orange light warmly wavered. The transparent tree was really beautiful. The candle's aroma drifted to and tickled her nose.

Taiga pulled out the pins that tightly kept her hair up and watched the flickering fire as she put her elbows on the table. Only the sound of the heater grated on her ears. She covered her head with the scarf and blocked out the noise. She was satisfied with the quiet and thought that was good enough. Her body, which was tired from the bustle of the last few days, seemed close to drifting into sleep.

She was alone this year, too. Santa wouldn't come this year, either. Trying to act like a good girl at this time, as though she had just remembered, was too late. If anything, she'd created enough trouble to get suspended this year, and there really wasn't any Santa, anyway.

So, she was alone this year, too.

She would probably be alone next year.

She would probably be alone in the future for a long, long time. Thinking that, Taiga closed her eyes from drowsiness, as though she were dying comfortably in her sleep. While she was alive, she would probably always be alone. Like she had been until then, forever from there on out, she would probably be alone. It was her fate for being born to her parents. There wasn't anything she could do about it.

Taiga closed her eyes.

What a life, she thought, self-aware. Taiga only felt somewhat motivated when she thought someone was watching. Of course, she knew that was just a dream. It was precisely because she knew it was a dream that she could allow herself to believe it.

She couldn't be dependent on anything—on anyone. She wouldn't have been able to live the life of Aisaka Taiga if her heart were that weak. In order to live by herself, she needed to become strong. But if it was a dream, her fleeting imagination that would never become reality, then she thought it was okay to hang on to. If you killed someone you hated in your imagination, it wasn't a sin, after all. If you were to be with someone in your imagination, it wasn't something the other person would know. That was what it was like. Even if she depended on it, as long as it was a dream, she wouldn't become weak. Or so she hoped.

I've been living completely dependent on it, though...

"Huh?!"

She jolted awake.

At some point, she might have fallen asleep—no, she had just been asleep for a few minutes. She had suddenly felt like she was falling and like she had heard someone say something. And then...

"Huh?!"

This time, she actually jumped up. She reflexively got on her knees and turned to where the sound had come from. *Rattle rattle rattle*, the glass went—it was the sound of someone hitting the window. She heard it coming from her bedroom.

Was it a thief? A pervert? A murderer? She heard the sound again more clearly, so Taiga stood up without making any noise. She firmly held the scarf around her exposed shoulders and boldly headed towards the bedroom where she had heard the sound. *Please stop. This isn't a joke*. She didn't want to die in a fire on Christmas Eve, but being murdered by someone was even worse. Her wooden sword was in her bedroom. She had faith in her strength. She didn't

know how much of a chance she stood against a real criminal, but it was better than taking it sitting down. She opened the door and stepped into the frigid, pitch-dark bedroom with her bare feet. She was prepared for death as she opened the curtain.

Eek!

Her strangled cry only made it to the back of her throat. She had been so surprised, she couldn't make a sound.

She fluttered to the ground, lost her balance, and sat down.

Why was it that on the other side of her window, standing on the wall that partitioned her house from the Takasus', hitting the glass with its hand against her window, just about to fall, was there a bear? And a bear with a Santa hat on?

Knock, knock, knock, knock! The bear's hand hit the window glass more roughly. As though it were shouting, *I'm gonna fall!* Maybe reaching its limits, its feet were wavering. Its propped-up body quivered all over. It would probably fall in a few seconds, and she was witnessing it right on the verge of danger before her eyes.

"Sa—"

Her hesitation disappeared, and without thinking, she rushed to open the window.

"...Santa-san?"

She reached out her hand and pulled it into her room. If Santa didn't actually exist, she really was completely screwed. But once she pulled it into her bedroom, the bear lay on the floor on all fours for a while, panting for breath.

"Haah, haa."

Finally, it nodded for her.

It said it was Santa.

"No way. ...Really?"

It nodded again. It held its oversized head and nodded very slowly. It wasn't a

lie. It really was Santa. And it was even eloquently telling her that.

“Ah...ha ha ha...”

Though she didn't know why on earth she felt like it, she started laughing before she realized it.

“Aha ha ha ha! What is this?! Aha ha ha!”

She held her stomach and laughed out loud. She had no idea what was actually going on, but she really believed it. This was Santa Claus. A bear Santa had come for her. She had been a good girl, so just as promised, Santa came to her again. She burst into loud laughter and took Santa's hand. She stood Santa up and pulled its arm as it waddled. She brought it to her cluttered living room.

“Santa-san! Look, this is my tree for this year!”

The black plastic bear eyes looked at the small tree. Then it once again turned to Taiga and gave her a thumbs up. She had been praised by Santa Claus!

“Yay! I thought this was definitely beautiful! I did it, I did it! Amazing! Santa-san actually praised my tree... No, it's not just the tree! This is amazing, amazing, amazing! Ahh, it's so amazing, you actually came! Santa-san really came! Well, you're a bear, but it's fine even if you are! It's completely fine! This is like...a dream!”

Kyah! Taiga shrieked as she jumped up. She jumped and twirled around in place several times. She was so, so happy. She turned to the heavens and threw her hands up and blew kisses upwards.

Then she sang the Christmas song she had practiced for the band performance. *Hop, step, jump!* She jumped into Santa's arms. She hugged fiercely with both her arms. She hugged with all her strength, desperately. The warm Santa bear gently reached out its arms and firmly hugged Taiga back. It patted her on her head and hair and squeezed her.



Were there ever arms that hugged her like this before?

Were there any other arms that she believed in and would never betray her heart?

No, no, no, no, there weren't. There were no other arms. There weren't any anywhere else. They were only here. She felt the warmth from her joy bubbling up from within her. She was so excited, she was like an idiot. She wasn't alone this year. Taiga closed her eyes and nuzzled her cheek into the warm chest. This year, Santa came. Her dream came true. It was reality. It was hugging her.

Still holding on with all her strength, Taiga kept singing. She buried her face in its dusty-smelling body, still in bare feet as she stepped in time with the song. The Santa bear danced with her. To the right, to the left, then around and around, and this time around the other way.

She laughed like an idiot and danced until her legs were about to give out. She hugged it and sang her song terribly. She sang her favorite phrase over and over again in a loop. She hugged it several times and fell down and laughed until she cried... It would have been nice if they could have stayed like that forever. If only she could have danced with Santa bear forever.

But.

"Ahh...it really is real! My dream really has come true!" she muttered and raised her face.

Phew. She breathed out one long breath.

The dream that couldn't have come true had come true. It was reality. If it were a dream, she could have just wished for it to have lasted forever, but no matter how much she wished for it, she would have eventually woken up.

Reality wasn't like that.

"Thank you..."

She had to pull away the curtain with her own hand, with her real, flesh-and-blood hand.

"Really, thank you...Ryuuji."

Out of breath from laughing too hard, she pulled off the bear head, which seemed like it must have been stifling. Even though it was winter, a bright red face plastered with sweat appeared from within.

“Hey! Don’t take it off, you idiot!” Without thinking, he started to scold her. Why was he so flustered? Did he really believe she wouldn’t have figured it out?

“So,” said Taiga, “where did you find this thing?”

“I borrowed it from the guy who was wearing it.” Ryuuji bluntly turned his eyes away, but he smiled awkwardly. The bangs he had slicked up for the occasion were stuck to his forehead, all for naught. No, this wasn’t about his hair.

“Wait...then what happened to the suit?”

“Like I said, I traded with the guy who was wearing this. Oh, but I’ll return it of course! Naturally, of course!”

Haaah. She sighed. What an idiot—Ryuuji was really an idiot.

“I can’t believe you would take it off in a time like this! Seriously, you idiot! Idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot! I went through all the trouble of getting it ready! And you were going to see Minorin!”

“Why are you saying I’m an idiot?! Hm?! What do you mean I’m going to see Minorin?!”

“Like I said, believe in angel Taiga-sama. Minorin should be headed to the party. She might already have even arrived. Look, you might still make it, so hurry up and go back!”

“Huh?! But...well, but, today is... I look like this and I came home because I didn’t want you to be alone.”

“What are you saying?! I’ll be fine!” She shot the lazy oaf down and smiled arrogantly. “We’ve got a genuine Santa and a genuine good girl here. It’s been a while since I laughed until it hurt! With the way you look...it’s hilarious! Oh, of course, I’m looking forward to tomorrow and the feast you promised. In the one-in-a-million chance everything goes well with Minorin, we’re having a feast tomorrow at your house! You haven’t forgotten, right?!”

“O-of course not! It’s not like I’d forget!”

“Good! Look, go! Stand! Hurry! If you’re not at the party, I’ll have lied to Minorin.”

Ryuuji looked down at Taiga.

Taiga shrugged and smiled again. She pointed straight at Ryuuji’s face.

“And ‘Santa’ came, right? I’ve gotten my compensation, so now I need to be a good girl until the very end of the year. Let me be a good girl. My real present for you is having Minorin go to the party. So...please take it. Please.”

Are you really okay alone?

That was what she thought she heard Ryuuji say. Taiga repeated over again, *I’m fine, it’s okay*, and forcefully pulled Ryuuji by the arm. She tried to push him into the entryway from the hallway, but Ryuuji went “Whoa!” as though he had remembered something and went back to the living room. *What is it now, you oaf*, she thought when Ryuuji blew out the candle in the tree. “We’ve taken care of the fire!” He pointed at it to confirm. He said something about not being able to leave with the fire still on because he would be worried.

He really was a sensitive guy.

“Okaaay, okay okay, I got it. I’m a klutz, so I won’t light a fire anymore. I swear. Are you okay now? Seriously, you’re a busybody...I get it, so hurry up! The party will be over! Look, look! Off you go!”

She prodded and slapped at his back to push him. She even kicked his butt to boot. She pushed him to the entryway and threw him out the door into the hallway. If he ran around the streets looking like that, he’d definitely get noticed, but...no, it was Christmas Eve, so people would adjust to the unexpected.

“Now go, you lazy dog!”

“Thanks!” In the end, Ryuuji finally yelled that and turned his back to her. Taiga didn’t even look at Ryuuji before she closed the door.

Then, she turned the key.

He had finally gone.

She took a breath. With this, her mission was really complete. Angel Taiga did what was necessary of her. The footsteps going down the stairs became more and more distant until she finally couldn't hear them anymore.

"Ahh...I'm so tired..."

It was her own fault for making such a fuss. Alone in her house again, the silence returned. Taiga stretched as she went back to the living room in her bare feet.

In the too-quiet room, the sound from the heater really was grating. But when Ryuuji was there, she hadn't remembered it at all.

"He finally left, he finally left, he finally left..."

She returned to where she had originally been on the rug and hummed a lame song in a low voice as she thought about lighting the tree again. She would do it carefully, so it would be okay. What was the use of not lighting the candle she had just bought?

"Huh? Huh, huh, huh... Why?"

She couldn't find the lighter.

She tried to remember where she had put it. She could only remember putting it down right there. After that, Ryuuji had appeared and had made a fuss like an idiot and then he had blown out the fire.

"Oh...maybe..."

Maybe Ryuuji had thought she would do this and had taken it with him. That was the only explanation she could think of. He was Santa and didn't even have a present for her. What guts he had to steal from her too! She decided that once it was the twenty-sixth, she could reduce him to two-thirds of his life.

Unable to do anything else, she stood up and looked around for anything else she could use. She looked in the drawers of the table that Ryuuji had organized, and rifled through the TV stand Ryuuji had organized, and looked into the drawers Ryuuji had organized, but she really couldn't find a lighter or a match. *What is this?* Taiga thought as she stood in place. It was her own house, but she couldn't even tell where anything was.

She couldn't light the tree's candle like this.

"I don't like this..."

He really was a sensitive guy.

"I really...don't like this..."

But he had made such an absurd entrance. What was he doing being a bear?

"I don't..."

And he just dawdled forever. She wondered if he had actually made it.

"I—"

If he really did tell Minori his feelings...

...she would hate that.

"Huh? Why?"

She was surprised when she questioned herself. When she touched her face with her hand, her fingertips were wet.

Why? Why were there tears running down her face?

"Oh...right."

She thought for a bit and quietly nodded and accepted it.

Because this was the end.

Just like a dream, she depended on Ryuuji to live. She told herself excuses that hadn't made sense—"I'm not dependent on him, I'm letting him look after me!"—and she thought "This is just for now. If Ryuuji were to move, or if I were to move, or if he started dating Minorin, or I started dating Kitamura, we couldn't stay like this, anyway," and she lived with Ryuuji. She had lived allowing Ryuuji to be kind and depending on him. *This is also a dream, so it doesn't make me weak. This is okay.*

Tonight, that would end.

She thought that Minori was drawn to Ryuuji. She really thought that Ryuuji was in love with Minori. In other words, their feelings were mutual. So the two

of them would probably start dating. Then she couldn't be like she had been. She couldn't come and go to the Takasus' as she pleased like she had been. If anything happened, she couldn't even call on Ryuuji anymore. She couldn't walk beside Ryuuji anymore. She wasn't the one who would be beside him.

So...

"I don't want that..."

She was sad.

She was surprised.

She hadn't thought about that at all. She hadn't thought in the slightest that she really didn't want to leave Ryuuji. The one she had been attracted to, the one she had admired and whom she had dreamed about was always Kitamura Yuusaku. She had always been thinking of him. The person she should have been in love with was Kitamura Yuusaku. But if she were, then why had this happened?

That time—she remembered the day she had been hurt, when Kitamura Yuusaku confessed to the girl he liked. She thought about herself on that day, how she was in such a rage she didn't think about herself, but went ahead to kill Kanou Sumire.

That time, for sure, she was thinking of Kitamura more than herself. She was more worried about Kitamura's pain than her own. The reason why she had been able to put her own feelings aside for later was probably because Ryuuji had been there. It was because she believed that Ryuuji would understand what was happening in her heart. So it was good that she hadn't looked into how she had been hurt. She had thought that Ryuuji would always be by her side and watching over her.

And then, she might have been right. Because the person who came to grab her hand as she was making the mistake of violence, who came to stop her, who came to help her, was Ryuuji.

He spoiled her and cared for her. Without being aware of it, she had come to depend on and cling to his kindness to live.

The reason why she had been able to love was all because she had felt Ryuuji

being there by her side as her strength. It was because as she thought about the possibilities, as she thought about whether this or that could happen, as she thought about whether Kitamura could think this way or that, as she grew excited about those things, Ryuuji had always been watching over her. It was because she knew he would be watching over her. It was because she had entrusted her heart to him.

Until it came to this—until she lost it, she really hadn't noticed at all. Taiga hadn't noticed at all the blessing it was that he had been the keeper of her heart. She hadn't thought that Ryuuji being there was a strength. What an idiot she was. She wanted to kick off her own empty head. She didn't even know the ground she was standing on. Without the soil called Ryuuji, there was no way any flowers could actually grow. She couldn't even rub away the tears dripping off her chin.

Without Ryuuji, she couldn't even love.

Because, like this, like right now, she could barely even stand.

She didn't know whether she could live or not.

She needed Ryuuji.

In other words, she loved Ryuuji.

She had loved him for a long time.

She didn't want it to be the end, she couldn't believe it was the end, she didn't want to not be by Ryuuji's side. She couldn't stand it and couldn't live with it. She didn't want that. She didn't want that to happen.

No!

“...!”

She started running for dear life.

She ran out of the living room, kicked open the door with her bare feet, and ran out the entryway. She ran through the cold hallway. Taiga followed after

Ryuuji on the stairs he ran down. She went down three flights. The hem of her miniskirt split. She ran at full speed out the marble entrance with all her might. She didn't know how to stop the tears that were overflowing. *Please make it, please make it*, she thought, not breathing, like she was praying.

She hurled herself at the heavy glass door to open it. She tumbled into the cold wind blowing on the street at night. The freezing asphalt stabbed at her bare feet.

She looked to the right. She looked to the left. He wasn't there. Ryuuji wasn't there. Ryuuji wasn't here anymore. *What should I do?* she thought as she covered her face, contorted with tears, with her hands. Her feet stopped, and she breathed in a lungful of the winter air.

"Ryuujiiiiiiii!" She turned to the night sky and yelled.

She noticed a couple passing by looking at her in surprise. "A fight? That poor thing...and it's Christmas Eve." So she was pitiful. Taiga started bawling even louder like a baby.

She cried and cried and called Ryuuji's name.

She knew that she couldn't reach Ryuuji anymore, but she kept yelling. Even when her voice went out, she kept yelling.

One part of her head was clear in her mind where the rest was in disarray, like a storm had passed through. There was a part of her looking down on herself crying and yelling as though exasperated. *This is why I don't like reality*. Unlike a dream, it could be broken. It could be lost.

That moment he had appeared when she wished for him, the feeling of him hugging her—all of it had been real. She wanted to stay like that. She wished she wouldn't lose it. Now everything would be smashed to pieces and disappear.

It was always a foolish dream.

That she mistakenly yearned for Ryuuji as a father figure. She mistakenly believed that Ryuuji and Minori would get together and that she would leave the nest and live by herself. That was the future she wished for, but she'd misunderstood everything. She was foolish, and she had been thinking with her

eyes half-open if she thought that she could stand the loneliness as long as Ryuuji, as her father, would raise her and give her the strength to live alone. It was a mistake to think of him that way.

Ryuuji wasn't her father. She was fixated on her father, who wouldn't think of her, and she was fixated on Ryuuji, too. And the moment she would "leave the nest" wasn't something to look forward to. It was just loss. She would lose Ryuuji, and she would have to live a future in solitude on her own.

In actuality, she wanted to be with Ryuuji. She had finally figured that out now. She wanted them to hold hands and proceed forward with each other forever into each new day, but now she couldn't do that. She had been late on everything. Reality had been shattered. She had woken from her dream. All she had left was herself.

Where did she go wrong? Ryuuji said it to her, hadn't he?

"I'm a dragon, and you're a tiger. Dragons and tigers come as a set."

But her idiot self was stuck in a dream, a dream where she pranced around Ryuuji, was spoiled by him, and had become dependent on him. She had run from it and hadn't thought about it seriously. She had put it off again and again, and that procrastination had left her like this.

"Ryuu—ji...!"

The world sank into tears.

I don't care, I'll just break it all—she might say. If this were a manga or a TV drama, around this time, they would have conveniently framed out. Or the guy would have appeared in front of her eyes. But reality was cruel, and no one framed out for her, and Ryuuji didn't appear. If she could have weakened until she died, it would have been dramatic, but humans didn't die that easily. Especially a girl like her, who was built to be incredibly sturdy.

She was unsightly, miserable, sad and lonely, wretched and pitiful, and looked like an idiot. But she was alive. That was Taiga's reality. She wouldn't run from this. She had cried, but she wouldn't die like this.

Because she wanted to become strong.

Because that was the truth.

She remembered the Miss Festival contest. Even in that time, she stood up. She would stand up now. Even without Ryuuji's or Minori's support, she would somehow do it by herself. From here on out, she really would show them she could do it alone. She would stand.

Taiga raised her face, wet from her tears.

She accepted it all and took it in. Even if she was embarrassed, she would live. She would lose many things, she would bear a lot of pain, she would become ragged and raise herself up and then, someday, she definitely would become a real, strong adult. For her own future, she damn well would stand up. She would fall many, many times in the process. When that happened, she would tenaciously rise again. She was abandoned by her parents? Just come at her. She was suspended from school? Just keep it coming. Ryuuji also left? What more have you got? They could come at her with anything.

This was all practice for the rest of the long life ahead of her that she would have to live alone.

But she called his name out of regret for one last time, "Ryuu...damn it! Ackh!"

She sneezed loudly.

She was too cold in her bare feet with her shoulders exposed. Her nose was also running. Taiga gritted her back teeth, sniffled, and slowly got up. She brushed off the stuff that had gotten on her knees. She wiped her face, which was itchy from the tears and snot. Then she stood, walked, and uncoolly went back into her condo.

Now, she really was alone.

It happened after that.

At the exact same time Taiga came running out of the condo entrance, Minori had been standing on the other side of the street. It wasn't coincidence; Minori had headed to Taiga's condo to ask what Taiga's true intentions were.

But then...

Minori, who had seen everything, understood completely. She knew that what she suspected hadn't been off at all.

I really did it, he thought.

In the winter sky, the stars and moon winked romantically, terrifyingly illuminating Ryuuji's contorted demon face.

Ryuuji was standing at the school gate, still in the bear kigurumi. He had just realized he left the present for Minori in the pocket of his suit, which he exchanged with someone from another class whose number he didn't know. He messed up right at the very end. Minori hadn't appeared yet, and he didn't know where the guy was. It might have been that he went home because Ryuuji disappeared.

He went out into the night thinking that the guy might have been hanging around nearby, but it didn't seem like anyone was around. *What should I do*, he thought as he cradled the bear head under his arm, looking slovenly as he breathed out mist. He didn't have the present for her, and he didn't know how to break the ice with her.

I've really done it, Taiga. His single mistake caused his soul to shake with anxiety. Suddenly, he grew timid and thought he would rather run from there. He felt like the reason why he didn't was because Taiga had kicked him in the back, and he felt she had handed him the phantom baton. If he didn't continue and hand it off, then Taiga's feelings wouldn't move forward, either. The relay from his dreams wouldn't continue on.

He had lost the present, but he wasn't empty-handed.

Ryuuji gripped the bear head, which felt cheap and made from synthetic fibers. In the cold wind of the winter, he faced his own weakness. The thing he wanted to show Minori was always within him. What was the point of running from that? He straightened his back, which had been rounded in the baggy kigurumi, and stood straight with his head held up. He didn't have the Gucci suit, but he could make sure he took Taiga's present into his hands.

That was when it happened.

“Hey!”

“O-oh!”

The one who appeared with light footsteps was Minori in a knit cap. Minori, whom he had been waiting for that entire time, finally appeared.

The inside of his mind went white. As though he had gone numb, his body stiffened.

Minori, who was in a down coat and jeans with a red-checked scarf wrapped around her face, raised her gloved right hand up. Her nose was red from being exposed to the cold wind. She was sniffing, but she smiled anyway.

It wasn't because of the cold that Ryuuji hesitated. He started to become flustered and trembled more than he thought he would. First, he would thank her for coming. He would explain his funny getup. Then, he would explain why he had so wanted her to come to this place, and then... All the things he had thought the moment Minori appeared in front of his eyes all disappeared. He internalized it desperately and righted himself.

“That’s a nice bear you’ve got there, Takasu-kun.”

Minori was the first to say anything. More or less standing at attention, Ryuuji looked at Minori, who was finally having a conversation with him for the first time in a long time.

As though noticing his gaze, Minori pulled her hat down low. Pretty much automatically, Ryuuji pulled up the knit cap that was hiding her eyes.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

The two of them remained speechless. Minori once again grabbed the hat and pulled it down. Ryuuji once again pulled it up. She pulled it down. He pulled it up. They continued their meaningless feud, and then finally...

“K-Kushieda!”

...Ryuuji stole Minori’s cap. Minori seemed to harden up for a moment. He

didn't know what she was thinking. She covered her face with her hands.

He wanted to grab her wrists and look at her face. He tried to pull her hands away, but Minori was really quite strong, and she wasn't going to move them easily.

"Wh-what is with you?!" he said. "What is it?!"

"What's with you, Takasu-kun?!"

"What's the matter with you?!"

"Takasu-kun, you're, you're...ah, who cares! Daaaaaah!"

Ryuuji couldn't speak. Minori unfairly had both hands firmly latched onto Ryuuji's mouth.

"Bergh...bah...ugh?!"

"Takasu-kun...sorry, let me talk first."

Then as though to push her face between her outstretched arms, she turned her head down fiercely. She wouldn't show Ryuuji what her expression looked like at all. Then she continued in a low voice.

"So...do you remember?" she said. "We went to Ahmin's villa during summer vacation and the two of us talked at night. About weird things. We talked about UFOs and ghosts and stuff."

"Buh...ubuh...?"

He nodded. *What about it?* Ryuuji faintly tilted his head. He couldn't tell what Minori was trying to say.

It was true that they had compared UFOs and ghosts to love. The ones who could see, saw them everywhere, but the ones who didn't, couldn't even feel they existed, or something like that. Then she said she might have been one of those people who couldn't see them. That's right. That was why Ryuuji wished for Minori to see UFOs and ghosts at every chance she got.

But why was she bringing that up now?

"So, I think that I'm okay with not seeing UFOs or ghosts, actually. I think it'd be better if I didn't see them. I thought about it a lot recently, and that's the

conclusion I've come to. I...wanted to tell you that, Takasu-kun. So I'm going home."

What meaning was there in saying that now?

"Sorry for telling you all this stuff. I'm going home now."

Minori gently released her fingers from Ryuuji's lips. She slipped the knit cap from Ryuuji's hands.

She pulled it far down to hide her eyes. Then she gave him a one-handed salute. It looked like only her mouth was smiling. Then Minori turned on her heel.

In wide strides, she quickly started heading home almost like she was power walking.

What?

In other words...

She had felt that he might confess and rejected him before he could?

"Huh? Seriously?"

Had he been rejected?

Really?

Was that what that just was?

Was this what that was?

"Did I just get my heart broken?"

In the street in the middle of winter at night, Ryuuji stood stock-still. He just had question marks in his mind. There hadn't been a chance to talk about presents—she hadn't liked him at all to begin with.

He didn't feel the pain yet. He stayed standing there, dumbfounded from the blunt impact, and looked up to the heavens.

"Even if it broke, it would be put back together." He didn't think it could heal.

"When it broke, it could just be remade." He felt he couldn't make anything anymore.

“That was why there was no reason to cry when it broke.” He couldn’t even cry.

Even so, he looked for Orion, which should have been shining.

He looked for someone his voice would reach.

The heavens rotated grandly.

It was December twenty-fifth, ten in the morning.

Yasuko found Ryuuji collapsed in the kitchen after she woke up. Only he knew how long he had been collapsed there. He had caught the flu and was running a temperature of over thirty-nine degrees Celsius.

He was carried off and admitted to the hospital, though he still wasn’t fully conscious. After getting the news from Yasuko, Taiga, who had come to the hospital making a huge commotion, also had strangely puffy eyes and was sniffing. She didn’t know what happened on that Christmas Eve night until two days later when Ryuuji finally regained consciousness.

Like that, still scarred and banged up, the year came to a close. Christmas and his cleaning spree, and everything else melted away and disappeared into Ryuuji’s fevered dreams.

“And then I had a Samurai resurrection...”

Ryuu-chaan, keep it together! Stay with us! With his mother’s voice in the background, Ryuuji’s near-boiling brain continued speaking about his cryptic delusions.

“I’ll use the murder beam with Taiga, bibibi, bibibi... I want to destroy this world...probably... But my dad works behind the curtains, and when you take off his mask, there’s Kushieda’s face... Why, why, Kushieda. What are you? And the spinster had her red thread cut and got jealous and bought...a condo...”

In the magic world fluttering with flames, Ryuuji fought something with a sword in his hand. He jumped into the air, cut through shadows, and while yelling the names of his moves, somewhere in his heart, he lamented: “I didn’t get to throw away the bulky trash this year!”

“It was a...disguise of high rank...”

Pull yourself together, you weakling! She double-slapped him with her small hand. *Oh, his eyes opened a little!* his mother exclaimed. *Stop, it hurts.* But he couldn't form that into words. Ryuuji simply, single-mindedly, continued to cut meaninglessly through his enemies in the magic world.

Ahh, this isn't fun. It's not fun at all.

Even if he opened his eyes, what was he supposed to look at?

In this night sky, the stars had already all exploded and disappeared.

And then he blacked out.

Afterword

So I'm decidedly in my thirties! Y-Yuko T-Miya here (age 30).

One day, I just suddenly forgot the PIN number for my condo's auto-locking door. I went out to walk my dog in my pajamas and a down jacket, and when I was on my way home, I was a disaster at the entrance. I had my dog held in one hand and just stood there. I couldn't remember a measly four numbers. And when I looked closer, I realized my pajama pants were inside out, and even though I had just gotten up, the rest of the world was in the early afternoon. When I just put in some random numbers, it wouldn't open, and it was in the middle of the winter, so it was really cold, and I was pathetic... Someone else who lived in the building came by and I got home, but it felt like the end and it was dreadful. I live like I'm rolling off a hill. You can't stop old A-G-E!

Somehow or other, I'm thirty, and *Toradora!* has gotten to volume seven. I am so incredibly grateful to everyone who has followed the series with me up until now! A-a-actually, I have news!

I started the series in 2005 and got to the seventh volume, plus one spin-off. Because all of you have supported me until today, I have some incredibly, incredibly, incredibly amazing news. This year! *Toradora!* Will become! An anime! Whoa...!

Rather than being happy, the feeling of "Wh-wh-wh-what should I do?!" is winning out. But anyway, in order to pay all my readers back for all the strength you give me, in order to have you enjoy yourselves, I think I'll try my best to make more great work. So please share your love and power with me for the next part of *Toradora!* Thank you so much!

So I wasn't just carelessly aging. Time, please stop...no, actually please come back! Anyway, please bring back my youth, even if it's just for my brain! You can age my body in its place! ...And so on.

While I was spending my days earnestly thinking about the laws of how to regain youth, immediately after I finished *Toradora! 7*, my left cheek exploded. It was super painful, hot, red, and swollen. For a very brief moment in time, I was laughing about it, "He loves me, he loves me not... This pimple means loves

me not!” Immediately, it became so big I couldn’t move my face and it obviously became something that warranted a hospital visit. Then, right when I was going to dermatology, a doctor said, “Ah!” and ended up pointing at the diseased part of my face. I didn’t even have time to tell them my symptoms, and they had me lay down on a bed and cut it with a small knife... That was pretty much it. This must be my curse for pleading for youth. This must be how it strikes back and punishes those who oppose the flow of time. I got a blemish at this age (I guess I should call this a gall; this isn’t a pimple, right?), and now I’m embarrassed for myself. So, using the orthodox methods, I’m eating a lot of sweets right now, and I’m solemnly sending the glucose straight to my brain.

So then, to everyone who also read this volume until the very end, I thank you from the heart. Thank you so very much! Next in the ever-expanding series is *Toradora! 8!* I hope you read the next volume, too! And to my manager and Yasu-sensei, I hope that you also help work on the next volumes!

—Yuyuko Takemiya



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